

Learning and Teaching Intercultural Communication; Challenging and Transforming Cultural Identities

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Abstract

Studying intercultural communication can be a challenging and transformative experience for students and for their teacher. The experience of being an international student studying abroad also challenges the personal and cultural frameworks that provide the security that enables us to function. The paper reports on a case study of a class in which these situations intersected and where, therefore, there was the potential for even more disruption of the students' frameworks. For the teacher these factors generate concerns about supporting the students in their coming to grips with questions of culture and identity, while also respecting their autonomy. Establishing a class culture in which the students shared their experiences enabled the expression of the factors of the experience of critical reflection, and rational discourse considered by Mezirow (1991) as integral to transformative learning. The students' individual journeys were undertaken with critical reflection and rational discussion shared with others who were on parallel journeys. They not only produced assessments of high academic quality but also exhibited transformation in their growth in understanding of themselves, their identities and their relation to the world. The key elements in transformative learning experiences include not only the discipline and the opportunities it offers to widen students' understanding, the personal attitudes and openness of the students, and the skills and approaches of the teacher, but also the social and cultural environment.

Keywords: learning and teaching intercultural communication; challenging and transforming cultural identities

Introduction

It is perhaps not surprising that studying intercultural communication can be a challenging and transformative experience for students. Becoming a student of communication in any of its forms—theoretical, business, organizational or particularly interpersonal—provides many opportunities for students to reconsider modes of behavior they usually take for granted and to acquire new perspectives. Communication is, per se, a personal activity, so any learning about communication that a student does will be relevant to their own communication interactions. In studying a subject which is so personal, the student is likely to be exposed to ways of thinking and behaving which differ from their own patterns; any study of

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communication which the student does more than cursorily is thus likely to lead to reflection upon patterns and habits of their own interaction. Mezirow (1991) emphasises that transformative learning is rooted in the way humans communicate. The opportunities for personal learning are considerable, but the possible disruptions to established patterns of thought and behavior may be positive or negative.

Being a student in a class on intercultural communication opens up even more many possibilities for transformative learning, not only because of the opportunities for learning about one's own and other cultures but also because of the challenges that result from fundamental conceptions of identity. As Kim acknowledges, "Communication across cultures is inherently stressful as it challenges our taken-for-granted assumptions" (Kim, 2015, p.4). Thus, teaching intercultural communication means the teacher is also likely to face particular challenges and opportunities when students are exposed to ideas and attitudes which may be disturbing at a fundamental level. The teacher must be open to these possibilities and the considerable potential for disjunction and disconnection, which is inherent in the challenges to culture and identity. For the teacher, these factors generate concerns about supporting the students in their coming to grips with questions of culture and identity, while also respecting their autonomy. This paper reports on a case study that exemplifies many of the challenges likely to be encountered in teaching intercultural communication. These challenges had particular resonance for the teacher and the class of students in this study because of the intensification of the experience through its social and cultural setting. Therefore, through reporting on a particular teaching experience, this paper provides a case study, which may illuminate the role of the social and cultural environment in transformative learning and teaching.

The same challenges that occur in studying intercultural communication are inherent in becoming an international student. Being an international student studying abroad can be challenging as the personal and cultural frameworks, which provide the security that enables us to function, no longer provide solid ground. The security comes through primary socialization from "frames of reference [which are] are structures of assumptions through which we understand our experience. They selectively shape and delimit expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings. They set 'our line of action'" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 5). Similarly, Taylor regards "Frames of reference as structures of assumptions and expectations that frame an individual's tacit points of view and influence their thinking, beliefs and actions" (Taylor, 2008, p. 5).

The culture in which one grows up progressively provides the fundamental frames of reference, frames that are challenged when a person encounters new experiences that affect their basic beliefs and the very core of their existence. Critical reflection is not always present at such times, and, if present, reflection may be conscious or under the surface. However, being open to the change in perspective can result in a transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991). Taylor (2008) provides the example of an American in Europe exposed to an intercultural experience, critically reflecting on it, and engaging in dialogue with others. "Through multiple interactions with others, Marie Claire questioned her deeply held assumptions about her own culture in relationship to the host culture" with the result that "Central to Marie Claire's transformation is her intercultural experience, critical reflecting on her experience, and engaging in dialogue with others. Her experience of learning to adjust to living in Switzerland becomes the gist for critical reflection" (Taylor, 2008, p.6).

There is the potential for even more disruptive consequences when the two situations occur simultaneously; for example, with a student studying intercultural communication at the

same time as being, or becoming, an international student. The increased challenge has the potential for considerable disruption of the student's frameworks. In this study, not only were the students displaced into a foreign culture, they were at the same time challenged to theorize and question their modes of communication by their involvement as students of intercultural communication. Moving to a new society and studying intercultural communication each offer transformative opportunities to adaptive individuals but each has also the potential to 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 Simultaneous Challenges

Kim (2015) explains that in order for someone to accept and acculturate to a new culture, both deculturation and acculturation must take place (p. 5). As acculturation takes place through new learning, deculturation (unlearning of some of the old cultural elements) occurs when new responses are adopted in situations that previously would have evoked old ones. While stress can be generated when our mental and behavioural habits are called into question, the experiences of stress present us with opportunities for adaptation and thus, growth.

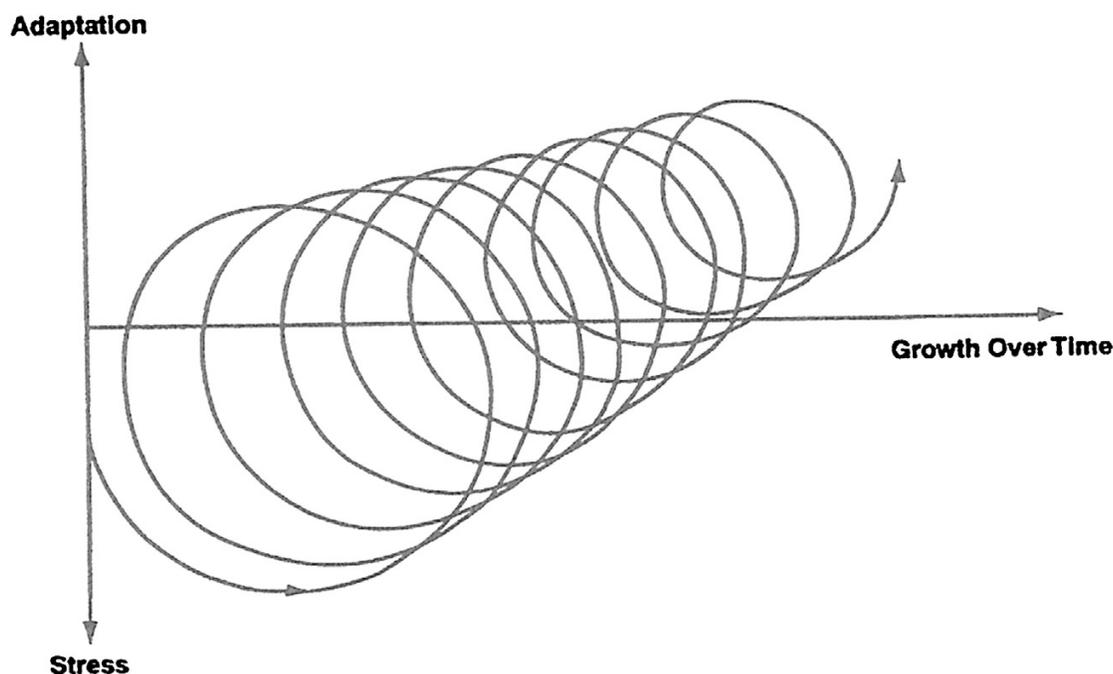


Figure 1 The stress–adaptation–growth dynamic *Source: Kim, 2001, p. 59.*

As Figure 1 illustrates, both the processes of deculturation and acculturation involved in the dynamic of the immersion and adjustment to a new culture take time. In the class reported in

this paper, the students were exposed to personal and academic challenges simultaneously in a compressed time period. 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, resulting in the likelihood that the stress-adaptation-growth dynamic (Figure 1) will occur in a condensed and pressured form, creating problems for teacher and student. Are there factors that will assist the teacher in guiding the students through the adjustment and challenge to their existing identities?

In the intercultural communication class reported on in this paper, the students faced the intertwined situations of undertaking study into intercultural communication and of being an international student. Eleven of the twelve students had been born in countries other than that in which the teaching took place, and three quarters had arrived in the country within a month of the commencement of the class. While studying intercultural communication was, therefore, a pertinent activity for them, the students were at the same time researchers and subjects immersed in a situation where they faced new cultural experiences daily, at the same time as they were being intellectually challenged to reconsider their cultural frameworks. They faced, simultaneously, challenges in acknowledging and accommodating other ways of doing and being and challenges to the social construction of their sense of self (Gudykunst, 2003).

Would the experience of living in a different culture and questioning their own academic frameworks be transformative for the students or would it overwhelm them? The potential was for the experience to be disruptive by prompting the students to re-examine their fundamental beliefs and cast doubt on their identity and sense of self. It also had the potential to be transformative, providing an opportunity to move beyond their previous understandings. 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? What factors helped to ensure that the students engaged positively with the process so that the outcome was transformative?

The Social Setting, the Participants, and the Course

The paper reports first on the composition of the student group and the environmental determinants in the form of the course outline and requirements. It then outlines the growth of a class culture and presents some indications of student responses to the course before concluding with reflections on the significant factors.

The university is one of eight public universities, situated in a country area just outside the third largest city. Previously an agricultural college, it now covers a range of disciplines with a significant number of students newly arrived from other countries as migrants, as international degree students or in an exchange program. Many of the international undergraduate students are enrolled in degrees in Business and come from Asian countries, particularly China, seeking an English-medium education. At the fourth year level a large number, like those in this class, are from many parts of the world.

In the semester referred to in this paper there were twelve students in the class: five exchange students from Germany; an exchange student from Norway of Indian descent; two students from India who had come to the country for graduate study; another from one of the

group of Melanesian islands in Oceania known as the Solomon Islands; a South African-born citizen who had emigrated a few years earlier as an adult; and two additional students, one of whom had been born in the United Kingdom. Thus, a minority of students, the three whose country of origin was South Africa, the United Kingdom and an additional country, had English as their first language, and there were at least five different home languages represented. The cultural backgrounds in terms of the country of origin of the students were even more varied. Even with the native English speakers there were varied cultural backgrounds and among the German-speaking students were those from small towns and others from large cities.

Given that half of the students were on exchange programs and had only recently arrived in a country that was, for them, on the other side of the world, and others had just arrived as overseas students, the cultural setting of the university was for most unfamiliar. The students were a very diverse group but there were shared characteristics that suggested the students had abilities and experiences that would help them cope with the change in environment. They were all in their twenties or thirties, and, as well as bringing a degree of maturity and knowledge of many languages, they brought with them a range of experiences, including a number intercultural experiences. Their learning, therefore, was situated in personal experience as well as in the group setting of the classroom.

I, as the teacher, had experience of living and teaching in Canada and Malaysia and considerable exposure to teaching students from many national and ethnic backgrounds, including in communication courses. I had taught intercultural communication as part of general undergraduate communication courses and had developed the postgraduate course. It was comparatively new to the university, having been taught once before, the preceding year, to a small group of students.

The course was an elective open to students, both local and international, whatever their disciplinary area. It aimed to provide students who were interested in the challenges of operating in an increasingly globalized world with an in-depth understanding of the nature and diversity of intercultural communication through the study of the theories and practice (COMN 603, Intercultural Communication). Although the class was an upper level one, there was no requirement for the students to have studied communication previously and, while some of the students had had some exposure to the field, none had any in-depth background. Although there were no formal disciplinary prerequisites, the academic expectations were that the students would be able to work with a degree of sophistication and independence and that students enrolling in the course would possess the competencies required for social science or related study at fourth year level.

The program consisted of twelve weekly sessions, each of two hours. The seminar format of the class was based on the expectation that that the students would read assigned and independently chosen material, engage in reflection and in class discussion and participate fully by leading class seminars. The seminars required the students to present prepared work on assigned topics to the class; they were also required to submit two pieces of written work of 3000- 4000 words, from a list of topics or one individually negotiated with the examiner. The students' seminar topics were chosen to complement the set readings and themes for each week: an overview of intercultural communication; elements of cultural systems; theories of cultural development and change; underlying dimensions of culture; linguistic diversity and intercultural communication; intercultural communication and non-verbal messages; adapting to culture; intercultural communication competencies; intercultural communication and conflict; and social influence on intercultural communication. An alternative pair of assignments, consisting of first a

review the literature on intercultural communication which is relevant to a proposed project, and then carry out the project was offered to provide the opportunity for independent supervised research. The latter option was not taken up by any of the students but several accepted the opportunity offered to negotiate an alternative topic to those topics assigned for their second essay.

The Class Experience

Creation of a respectful class culture began in the first session. Expectations of involvement and courtesy were established along with the introduction to the requirements and norms of the university. Common ground was established when students were encouraged to share their expectations and stories of previous intercultural experiences. Everyone contributed stories of encountering customs that seemed strange, ranging round the world. Japanese and Spanish customs were discussed along with adjustments Europeans have to make when living in the United States. The tone was light-hearted but purposeful. There was a sense from the beginning of the emergence of a group culture and that this might enable the transformative learning that O'Sullivan (2003) says:

involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and irreversibly alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our relationships with other humans and with the natural world; our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race and gender; our body awareness, our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy. (p. 327)

As the teacher, however, I wondered how I was going to integrate a class where one student talked about being amazed at the height of the buildings in New Zealand's largest city, Auckland and others reacted to the same city by wondering where the tall buildings were. I learnt that thanking the driver when you get off the bus, a custom I was used to, was a strange to the German students. But then, one of them from a small town in Bavaria, disagreed with his compatriots explaining it was the custom in his area also, and so what had been presented as a cross-cultural difference began to look more like the difference between small town or city culture and large city culture. That was an early sign that the class would look at culture as multi-faceted, not confined to national or ethnic identities. The class culture soon acquired further characteristics I had not expected. When the first student concluded her seminar loud knocking sounds were heard as the German students, to her surprise and mine, knocked on the table in appreciation, thus establishing a class norm. Humor also became a feature of the interactions among class members with another piece of class culture established by the good-natured teasing of the German student who, after a discussion of German punctuality, declared against cultural stereotyping, that being on time did not matter.

We worked through a set of readings that drew on a wide range of cultural encounters but much of the learning came from the spontaneous comments and experiences of the class members. Some of the most frequently cited examples the students brought to class came from their experiences outside the cultures they had as their primary cultures. They talked about interactions including: between Afrikaners and the Bantu and other tribes of South Africa, of the experiences of one of the German students when he lived in the Basque country, of another on

exchange in Denmark, of learning about culture from new friends the exchange students had made, and about experiences of a student conducting the field work for his master's thesis in Fiji.

Student Achievements

The students demonstrated their progress in the classroom and in their assignments, with the assignments illustrating the “movement to a higher level of mental complexity” which Scheele regards as “an important framework for understanding the changes individuals undergo in a transformative learning experience” (Scheele, 2015, p. 5).

Although subsequently increased empirical attention to how intercultural identities are managed has now been more extensively covered in the literature, e.g. Kim, 2008; Kim, 2015, the class took place at a time when fewer readings were easily available about how those between two cultures are able to “manage and negotiate their dual cultural identities” (Benet-Martinez & Haritatos, 2004, p.1). In an essay in the previous year's class, Suzanne (like all the names given, this is a nom de plume) had explored the concept of interculturality, aligning findings from the existing literature with observations and information from her peers outside the class who had experienced the pull of being between two cultures, She illustrated how the difficulties of becoming an ‘intercultural person’ can lead to growth, concluding,

The stress of the acculturation process and the coping techniques subsequently put into place to manage living between two cultures provide intercultural people with social and cultural resources above the boundaries of their ethnic identities (“Suzanne,” 2005).

That class that year learnt from the discussion that resulted from the readings and from her seminar of the conflicts inherent in the situation of being between two cultures. However, no one in that class was able to integrate academic knowledge with the personal experience of having faced the conflicts inherent in the situation and reached a point of integration.

The next year, because of the class reported in this study, the students and I were able to move closer to understanding the possibilities arising from this dilemma because of hearing from a student who had faced the challenge and integrated two cultural selves into her identity. One of the students, whom I shall call Bindi, had grown up and gone to school in Norway after her family had moved there from India. In the classroom she shared her experiences and responses of existing with and in dual identities, one the one she lived in as a member of her family, the other that of her life at school and with her Norwegian friends. She explained the complexities and contrasts of the journey of negotiating interculturality and how she negotiated living with dual identities with both senses of self being present concurrently, but only one being manifest at a time. She provided including a sophisticated analysis of interculturality, illustrating theoretical learnings from readings with personal examples. She explained that at home she was respectful and restrained. With her friends she behaved more freely, in ways foreign to the culture of her family of origin. While Bindi was careful to keep what she described as her two different ways of thinking and behaving apart, both ways of being were integrated in her personhood. Bindi's elucidation of her successful adaptation to living with a cultural identity of ‘both-and’ resonated with the other students who had had similar, though less intense, experiences of immersion in, and adaptation to, a culture different from their original one. Her presentation and the resulting discussion extended the students', and my, understanding of multiple cultural identities. Bindi demonstrated how she was able ‘to embrace two or more seemingly conflicting identities into a new identity without losing the overall integrity of [her] personhood’ (Kim, 2015, p. 10).

Other assignments illustrated the students' growth in understanding and brought delight to me as a teacher. Introducing the students to major theories of cross- and inter-cultural communication produced some unexpected bonuses because of the ways in which the students applied them. The introduction and critique of Hofstede's (1991) intercultural dimensions led to an application of markers for distinctions between national cultures being applied within a culture. German student, Katya, applied Hofstede's dimensions to the differences she had encountered when introducing environmental perspectives to fishers and recreational sailors in a North Sea harbor. She used Hofstede's dimensions to reflect on the differences between the way the two groups asserted their cultural identities in response to suggested changes in ways of managing resources. Katya asserted and illustrated that national boundaries are only one way in which cultural boundaries can be delineated, leading the class to consider again the verity of such categorizations.

Even more dramatic was the journey of Ferdinand whose participation in the class came shortly after his departure for the first time from his strongly patriarchal Melanesian homeland. Although the geographical distance he travelled was lesser than many of his classmates who had come half way round the world, the cultural distance between his home and its warrior society and the cooperative culture of the class, his new environment, was striking. Ferdinand was quiet but thoughtful, observing the interactions of other students, although, as was appropriate in the cultural upbringing he brought with him, volunteering little himself. Unexpectedly, he came to request permission to tackle as an essay topic a feminist analysis of a Melanesian society. Although he had had little previous exposure to feminist theory it became clear, as he explained why he wanted to tackle the topic; he had long been aware of the hierarchal nature of his society of origin and the inequality of the role of women in it. He undertook readings that gave him the theoretical basis to step back and to analyze this aspect of the culture in which he had grown up. He produced an essay in which he was thoughtfully analytical about his home culture. For me as the teacher, Ferdinand's achievement was one of the highlights of the course because I had been uncertain about encouraging him to tackle such a topic because of his having, apparently, in terms of academic and personal readiness, the least preparation of those in the class.

The experience as teacher provided other highlights and surprises as well for me as the teacher: the openness in discussions, the students in discussion unanimous embracing English as a lingua franca where I had expected some dissent, and the depth of the unique culture of the class. This was multicultural and composite, differing from the culture of any student and also quite different from the culture outside the classroom. In essays and presentations students exceeded expectations, producing, as Ferdinand's achievement evidences, not only high academic quality and "disciplinary realizations" but also transformation in their increased "self-understanding in relation to the world" (Transformative learning, n.d.).

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? What factors helped to ensure that the students engaged positively with the process so that the outcome was transformative?

Conclusion

The critical factors enabling the quality of learning that took place were various. The class was composed of those who had positively undertaken both personal and intellectual challenges to their cultural sense of self. The students were adaptive individuals, mature, well prepared for, and open to the experiences they encountered. They were able to bring previous intercultural experiences to the class.

The course aimed to provide students with an in-depth understanding of the nature and diversity of intercultural communication through the study of the theories and practice of intercultural communication. It required the students to be critically reflective. They were required to undertake the learning that Brookfield (2000) considers only to be considered transformative if it involves a fundamental questioning or reordering of how one thinks or acts, a challenge to hegemonic implications.

The relationship established between the teacher and the students created a class culture, unique to the participants, which drew on their cultures and facilitated learning that was transformative for the teacher as well as the students. Slavick and Zimbardo (2012) regard the role of the teacher as critical:

Transformational teaching involves creating dynamic relationships between teachers, students, and a shared body of knowledge to promote student learning and personal growth. From this perspective, instructors ... accomplish these goals by establishing a shared vision for a course, providing modeling and mastery experiences, challenging and encouraging students, personalizing attention and feedback, creating experiential lessons that transcend the boundaries of the classroom and promoting ample opportunities for reflection and reflection. (p.571)

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 culture was key to the success of the class as it enabled the expression of the experience, critical reflection, and rational discourse considered by Mezirow (1991) as integral to transformative learning. 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 (Figure 2).

Individual critical reflection	Shared group experience and critical reflection
Individual experience	Shared group experience

Figure 2. Transformative learning: the transition from individual experience to group experience enhanced by sharing and critical reflection

That the individual journeys were undertaken with critical reflection and alongside others meant that the continual negotiation of multiple internal expectations and conflicts from opposing cultural viewpoints led to cultural adjustment and change in frames of reference within the individual, within the group, and as a group. When the class culture enables the individual experiences and journeys to be shared, the learning of all students is likely to be enhanced. When student experiences are transformative, the key elements in the learning experience will be not only the discipline and the opportunities it offers to widen students’ understanding, the personal attitudes and openness of the students, and the skills and approaches of the teacher, but also the social context and environment.

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