

Running Head: TRANSFORMATIVE INTERCULTURAL EXPERIENCE

Transformative Intercultural Experience

Team 2

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Most higher education administrators agree that in today's increasingly globalized society, both study abroad and internationalizing the campuses at institutions of higher learning are necessary components of a strong education. One of the goals that these administrators are trying to achieve through both study abroad and an internationalized campus is a transformative intercultural experience for their students. Higher education programs that include study abroad, foreign language programs, intercultural curriculum, and providing access to higher education in countries that cannot meet demands are indicative of the programming that many countries and institutions implement in order to remain relevant in the increasingly globalized world (Altbach & Knight, 2007). The massive expansion of the internationalization of higher education has increased the potential for cross-cultural experiences among students, faculty, and the global community as a whole.

For the purpose of this paper, a transformative intercultural experience is defined as one that goes beyond the superficial, involves knowledge of someone different than yourself-including varying degrees of difference, and allows for self-learning and self-reflection that can lead to personal changes. In this paper, we aim to examine how higher education institutions are conceptualizing and actualizing transformative intercultural experiences. We then argue that transformative intercultural experiences are found in many forms and are not defined by region. First, we look at policy and governance issues of higher education institutions in Europe. Next, we examine student experiences-both international students on American campuses and Thailand based co-op programs. Finally, we analyze intercultural experiences in practice, initially, through a sub-culture immersion program in Colombia, and secondly, through a look at the challenges facing South African institutions

attempting to incorporate diversity and intercultural education.

An increase in international competition in higher education prompted European Union members to foster cooperation in improving institutional links (Van der Wende, 2003). Yet, this cooperation is rarely deliberate with regard to the benefits of intercultural experiences. Much of the EU focus is devoted to competition in the global market, aside from the ERASMUS portion of the Bologna Declaration-which promotes study abroad among EU members. Most of the policy development has been dedicated to organizational and structural aspects of institutions rather than meaningful experiences of intercultural transformation.

European nations utilize systems of higher education as a vehicle for advancing EU economic, social, and academic mobility. The 1999 Bologna Declaration dictates strategies and initiatives that create compatible academic degree structures, fluidity in transferable credits, and definitive measures of academic qualifications (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Each of these goals addresses more expansive European higher education institutional priorities of prestige, competitiveness, and strategic alliances (Altbach & Knight, 2007). European Union governance in the form of the Bologna Declaration establishes voluntary transparency and compliance among European higher education institutions and directly relates national and EU objectives to policy implementation at the institutional level. The Bologna Declaration provides students and faculty with the necessary academic mobility that not only enhances their academic experiences but also furthers the purpose of EU member nations.

The priority of European Union higher education policy is not focused on the transfer of meaningful intercultural knowledge but rather more centered on economic, social, and academic mobility. It appears that European institutions of higher learning are, while

participants in study abroad and academic colonization, more targeted towards the functionality of global interdependence. Intercultural transfers and competency are not strategically developed.

Higher education policy is indeed a dominant part of improving intercultural experience, and we also need to look at how higher education institutions help their students to gain transformative intercultural experience in other forms. International students not only provide diversity to most campuses but also offer excellent opportunity for creating greater international awareness. Undoubtedly, international students can play an important role in improving intercultural competence for native students on campus.

Admittedly, students can learn significant knowledge of other cultures from their curriculum. However, “cultural knowledge does not equal intercultural competence.” (Bennett & Salonen, 2007, p. 46) Students may “master Japanese literature”, but it is quite possible that they are “not able to read between the lines when a Japanese student attempts to share a problem.”(Bennett & Salonen, 2007, p. 46) So in order to gain intercultural competence, students need more interaction between different cultural contexts. We should cultivate our intercultural competence in order to communicate despite differences among us.

In *Undergraduate International Students: A Resource for the Intercultural Education of American Peers?*, Marijke Breuning surveys undergraduate international students at “a small, primarily undergraduate, public liberal arts university in the Midwest” (Breuning, 2007, p. 1114) in order to know “their willingness and the ways they prefer to help their American peers of intercultural education.” (Breuning, 2007, p. 1114) The result shows, though international students account for only 4.1% of the student population in the university, they

are quite willing to help the international and intercultural knowledge of American students. 80% of international students see themselves as “unofficial ambassadors” (Breuning, 2007, p.1119) for their home country and their culture.

However, one thing that needs to be considered is that to a large extent, most American students do not realize that “learning can come from peer interactions, not just from their interaction with the instructor.”(Pandit & Alderman, 2004, p. 128) Accordingly, there are not many interactions between American students and their international peers. So it is higher education institutions’ responsibility to encourage and provide more opportunities for communication between American and international students.

Study abroad can also be an important way to gain transformative intercultural experience. We can see an example of a transformative intercultural experience in the Asian region from Coll, Pinyonathagarn and Pramoolsook’s article, “The Internationalisation of Cooperative Education: A Thailand Perspective”. This article examines the feelings of five Thai university students who completed co-op experiences abroad and three non-Thai university students who completed co-op experiences in Thailand. The Thai students identified the major benefits of their international co-op placement as better developed English language skills, increased understanding of international business culture, better career prospects and enjoyment of local travel in their host countries. International students reported the major benefits of their international co-op experience as improved English and foreign language skills, better understanding of a foreign culture and improved career prospects. From the self-identified benefits from both Thai and non-Thai students, we can see the beginnings of a transformative intercultural experience. The increased

understanding of a foreign culture is not a transformative intercultural experience in itself, but it is a start. Additionally, the researchers reported, “the greatest growth was not in technical skills, but in terms of personal growth with student[s] reporting increased self confidence and enhanced communication skills as a result of their international [co-op] placements” (Coll, Pinyonattagarn, & Pramoolsook, 2003, p. 2).

Both Thai and non-Thai students identified a challenge of international co-op placement as the short duration of the experience. With lengthier placements and more preparation preceding, during and following the international co-op placements, there would be a greater possibility for an even stronger transformative intercultural experience.

However, transformative intercultural experiences can happen not only among people of different countries, but also between people of different subcultures. One can look to the Institución Universitaria Colombo Americana in Colombia for proof that it is important to individuals there. As it was asserted earlier, students need more interaction between different cultural contexts in order to gain intercultural competence and authors Henao and Taylor believe that this can be achieved through their Subculture Adaptation Project which they conducted during an Intercultural Communication course at the Institución Universitaria Colombo Americana.

Henao and Taylor’s paper, *Intercultural Competency without International Experience*, gives the Subculture Adaptation Project purpose to be for its participants to become emerged in a subculture different from their own. The authors define a subculture as having its “own rules and patterns of behavior, inside knowledge, discourses and beliefs”

(Henaio & Taylor, 2005, p. 13) and can be such things as “age, gender, religious affiliation” or even “hobbies” and “personalities”. (Henaio & Taylor, 2005, pp. 4-7)

An important distinction about this project is its subculture focus. As the authors point out: “many treatments of intercultural competence are based on the concept of culture in its regional or ethnic dimension” (Henaio & Taylor, 2005, p. 4). Bennett explains this concept in a 1998 publication as “Big-C” culture. (Bennett, 1998, p. 24) Big-C culture would include components such as music, film, literature, dance, and art. (Bennett, 1998, p. 24) Bennett explains that studies are moving away from Big-C culture being the benchmark for knowledge of a culture. (Bennett, 1998) This shift will likely be beneficial and have widespread effects because “most of the models for developing intercultural competence assume the need to possess or acquire specific traits, characteristics, skills or competences in order to be more successful at dealing with members of other cultures, or with other individuals as well” (Henaio & Taylor, 2005, p. 8). This links to the earlier observance in this paper that while students may master a part of a culture (the example given was Japanese literature, which would be identified as a “Big-C” component of a culture) it does not mean that they will have a better ability to interact with Japanese students. That is, Japanese literature knowledge does not guarantee increased intercultural competence with Japanese culture and its people.

The creators of the project, Henaio and Taylor, give their purpose for studying and exploring intercultural communication through a subculture lens to be to help individuals have “more productive and peaceful relationships in their daily interaction in today’s society” and to confront “obstacles in the adaptations process, including stereotyping and

generalization, miscommunication and loss of face, confusion and anxiety.” (Henao & Taylor, 2005, pp. 5-7)

Through the Subculture Adaptation Project individuals have an increased likelihood of gaining true intercultural competence with people different from themselves. This project may be the model of the future at institutions of higher learning for achieving transformative intercultural experiences.

As the research suggests, transformative intercultural experiences are offered in a myriad of forms among institutions of higher education. These types of learning experiences can be administered formally through classroom exercises or informally almost by happenstance. The latter is true in the case of students at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) in South Africa, a diverse institution that accommodates students from various racial, ethnic, religious and socio-economic groups. In terms of fostering a spirit of collaboration and intercultural engagement, students participate in diversity programs as a result of completing leadership development experiences.

Leadership training affords student the opportunity to interact with others from different backgrounds through living on campus in student housing. Within student housing academic leaders design experiences that will cause students to interact. In comparison to the living-learning communities that have been implemented in the United States, administrators at NMMU are exploring new possibilities to incorporate more of the learning aspect into living communities. Student leadership training also focuses on the conflict resolution skills to be used in conflicts that may occur from interacting with individuals that are different. During a recent visit to Michigan State University, student leadership advisors

from NMMU expressed an interest in developing a campus culture that promotes students from various backgrounds interacting and developing relationships that extend beyond the academic classroom environment (face to face conversation, November 11, 2008).

Although these programs promote cultural understanding, they do not address or examine the societal structures that perpetuate injustice. Defining the purpose and role for diversity education is a challenge for South African faculty and student affairs officials. The perceived role of diversity scholarship among faculty has shifted from understanding differences to practicing how to manage differences (Cross, 2004), which is reflected in the case of NMMU. Student led and focused initiatives are tools for creating more empowered and culturally aware individuals; however, the longevity and maximum achievement of these programs is minimized due to the lack of academic curriculum to supplement the learning outside the classroom. Without curricula to reinforce the need for social justice and intercultural dialogue, current methods of fostering learning experiences are not effective and futile in the pursuit of a more equitable society. Students have to understand the fundamental reasons for seeking intercultural transformative experiences.

Laying an academic foundation for intercultural or diversity education is important in any region, but especially in a country that has experienced the legal segregation of people based on the theories of multiculturalism. South Africa's history of apartheid represents a conundrum because the concept that was used to divide is now utilized to create understanding and collaboration. South African higher education scholars and practitioners have to redefine diversity and its goals. Without a clear direction of the purpose of intercultural education and faculty support in South Africa, students may not experience

transformative learning opportunities.

In conclusion, transformative intercultural experiences do exist in different forms on college and university campuses all over the world. Students are gaining intercultural competency through interacting with people from different cultures and subcultures, which is essential in this increasingly globalized world. Higher education institutions have the responsibility to prepare students with intercultural competency, so they can be capable of working in various environments and thrive in the internationalized world.

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