

Beyond Understanding [_____] Students: Intercultural Competence that Begins with You

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A story

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"I hate heat. I just cannot function well when it is so hot outside, and today is not an exception. All I want now is to get on the bus that would take me home and rest before going to that event in the evening. Okay, where is the bus stop? No people around to ask for directions. Am I the only fool outside in this weather? Anyway, it must be somewhere here. Oh, here it is". I rushed to the bus stop. There were no buses around. The bus that could take me home had left 5 minutes ago, and the next one was coming in an hour. "Wait. An hour? An hour?! How can buses run once an hour??!! That just does not make sense! I cannot wait for another hour!!"

- Who is this person?
- What emotions is the person feeling?
- How might this person interpret this situation?

Another story

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➤ I needed to buy a couple of skincare items, and I took time selecting ones that could work for my sensitive skin. Suddenly, I noticed a man in military uniform, "A soldier," I thought, looking for something in the same aisle. I wasn't really paying much attention to the soldier, until I realized that every time I moved closer to him, he would move away even though he was not done checking whatever he was looking for. It was clear he intentionally kept a certain distance with me. "That's so weird... Why is he moving away? Do I smell?.."

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- What emotions is the person feeling?
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Deardorff's Process Model of Intercultural Competence

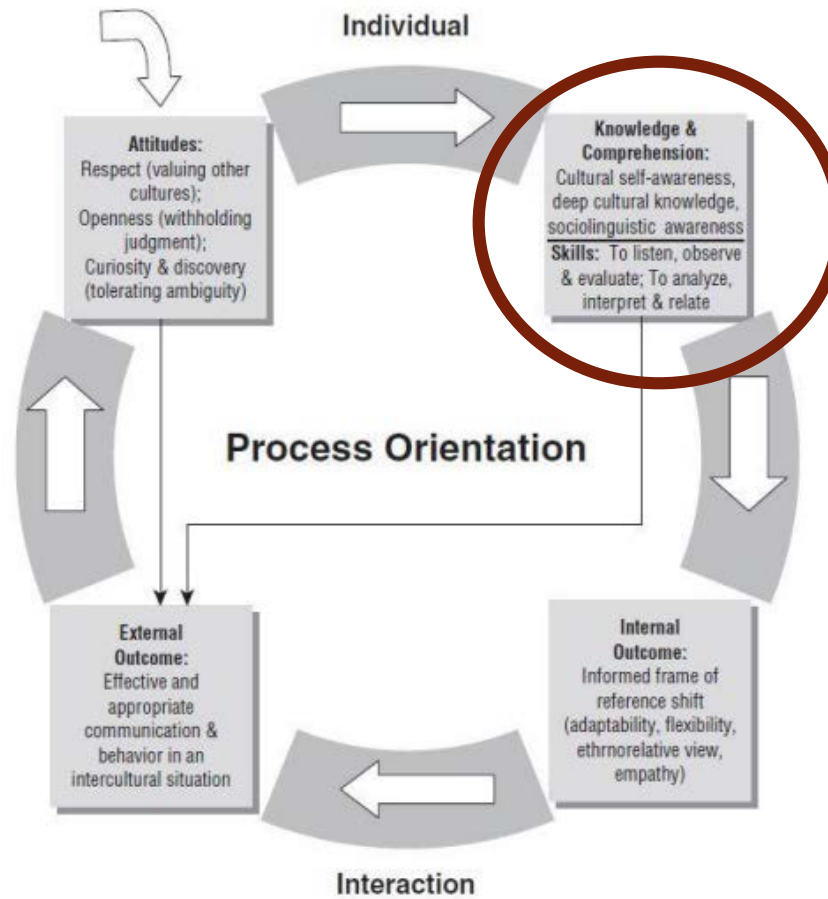


Figure 2: Process model of intercultural competence (Deardorff 2006, p. 257)

Key Factors for Intercultural Competence

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- Curiosity
- Cognitive complexity (ability to see through many perspectives)
- Empathy

Bennett, J. (2011). *Developing Intercultural Competence for International Education Faculty and Staff*. AIEA Conference, San Fransisco, CA.
www.aieaworld.org

Description-Interpretation-Evaluation Activity

- Find an ambiguous picture or object, or a visual/written representation of a situation with cultural conflict/dissonance.
- Demonstrate to the whole group, then break into small groups.
- "Tell me something about this object/picture/situation."

*All examples in this presentation are from *Halfway to Each Other*, Susan Pohlman

Practice

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Soon enough, our cart was full, and we headed to the little checkout counter. Embarrassingly, we had five times as much as every other customer in line. Finally, it was our turn. The conveyor belt at the checkout was—no surprise—small. It immediately clogged with all of our stuff, but the checker kept going.

“Where’s the bagger?”

Things started to tumble to the floor. We looked at each other in panic.

“Where’s the bagger?” People were staring (again).

“Where’s the bagger!?” The checker kept on checking away. Things kept falling.

Finally, it dawned on us. We had to buy plastic bags (paper is not even an option here) from the grocer and do it ourselves. As Tim paid the bill, I suddenly realized why everyone else had just a few things in their carts. Up the hillside we trudged, laden like donkeys with our white bags, in the soaring temperatures of the afternoon.

- Description = What do I see?
- Interpretation = What do I think?
- Evaluation = What do I feel?

Example 1

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I asked where I could buy things like sheets and towels.

“There is no place here,” Sabrina said.

“You can’t buy sheets?”

“Not here. You must travel about thirty minutes by car to Eekaya.”

“Eekaya? Can we get there by train?”

“It’s too late. It would be too complicated for you.” She checked her watch. “We are leaving now for our vacation home in Chamonix, but... uh... Stefano, we can drive them there first, no?”

First they bought us lunch, now they were going to drive us to some far-off town to buy sheets? I simply couldn’t believe how nice they were being.

They dropped Tim, Matt, and their two girls off at the apartment, and then drove Katie and me with our long shopping list to Eekaya—which to my amusement turned out to be Ikea pronounced Italian style—the only superstore in Genoa.

Example 2

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The previous tenants had just moved out, and the apartment was less than spotless. The refrigerator need to be cleaned, the drawers wiped out, the shelves and other surfaces dusted and the bathrooms disinfected. A quick tour before we began cleaning revealed no fewer than three to six air fresheners in every room! I'm not sure who the last tenants were, but deodorant had to be cheaper than that. Besides, how about opening a window or door?

Example 3

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As I unpacked and cleaned, we were visited by a variety of people who already had copies of the key to our place. No one seemed to feel that this was a safety problem...

Then there was a handyman, Andre, who spoke no English at all, but knew how to smoke unfiltered cigarettes faster than any human being I'd ever seen. He showed up to check the electricity and show us how to work the state-of-the-art security system that didn't seem to be working. It still wasn't working when he left, but he acted like it was. I didn't really care since Tim had demonstrated to the rest of us that the "open the window and stick your head out" method of seeing who was at the door was just as effective.

...I decided not to care about the key situation. We had nothing to steal anyway. It was my first "letting go." We had come here to let go of life as we knew it, and this was as good a place as any to start. We would not change the locks, and I would not complain about it.

Example 4

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We put on our walking shoes and headed out the door. The streets were old, narrow, and winding. There were no sidewalks on the way down the hill. You would think that drivers would practice caution and drive slowly so as not to endanger pedestrians, but instead, they drove with tires screeching as if they were spurred on by the sheer challenge of it.

Example 5

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Our first stop was the *farmacia* to get some aspirin and toothpaste. Everyone else decided to wait outside since the place was tiny and filled with people over seventy-five. I got in line and marveled at the abundance of anti-cellulite products that filled the shelves while customer after customer cut in front of me. Apparently, they didn't know the "no cuts" rule...

All of a sudden, I became aware that the old man behind me was breathing conspicuously close to the back of my neck. I turned around and glared at him.

"Excuse me," I said, but he didn't respond. I stared at him and gave a little shoving motion with my hands, but he continued to look right through me like a zombie.

Example 6

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I rolled the cart over to the produce section and started to pick out a few fruits and vegetables. As I pinched and poked, I noticed a lot of huffing and staring going on. People were clearly annoyed with me. Was I taking too much? It's a store, for goodness' sake. I pretended not to notice and continued to fill my little plastic bags with all sorts of salad makings. Before I knew it, I was surrounded by a bevy of irate silver-haired shoppers, arms folded and toes tapping.

"What?" I asked, holding up my arms in surrender. One of them pointed an arthritic finger toward a box near the bananas. She reached into it and whipped out a large clear plastic glove. The rest of them then held up their plastic-clad right hands.

Example 7

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(at the grocery store)

“Nothing on our list is even here!”

There were no Oreos, no spicy Cheetohs. No Campbell’s soup, no corn on the cob, no Chef Boyardee, no peanut butter. No baggies of any sort. No garlic salt, no Fruit Roll-Ups. No salad dressing or maple syrup. No pancakes or waffles. No Kraft Mac and Cheese. No cake mixes or frosting for Katie’s upcoming birthday cake. It was going to be healthy eating all the way.

Variety, here, was not the spice of life. The exotic food shelf held only a few cans of kidney beans, corn chips, and salsa. But what was offered was fresh and delicious. The cheeses, fresh meats, olives, marinated vegetables and pesto sauce were pictures from a gourmet magazine.

Example 8

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...Tim pointed to all of the bags on the sidewalk. The driver nodded as he went to the trunk of his cab and pulled out a long rope.

“Tim, don’t you think we might need two taxis?”

“He said he could do it.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I’m not going to insult the guy. None of the other cabbies wanted to drive as far as Nervi.” Tim motioned toward a line of cabs whose drivers were leaning against their cars pointing and laughing at our driver as he began to tie all of the bags to the top of the car. Obviously, people weren’t too keen on helping each other around here.

Post-Activity Discussion

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- ▶ Olena's big intercultural revelation
- ▶ What did your interpretations/evaluations of the situation reveal to you about your cultural lens?
- ▶ What surprised you about this activity?
- ▶ How could you use this?

References

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- ▶ Bennett, J. (2011). *Developing Intercultural Competence for International Education Faculty and Staff*. AIEA Conference, San Francisco, CA.
www.aieaworld.org
- ▶ Deardorff, D. (2006). Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 10(3), 241-266.