

Contextualisation de l'intelligence culturelle : le rôle de l'apprentissage expérientiel dans l'enseignement supérieur.

Contextualizing Cultural Intelligence: The Role of Experiential Learning in Higher Education.

Younes Aich

Enseignant chercheur

UNIVERSITÉ CHOUAIB DOUKKALI

Faculté des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines

— El Jadida, Maroc

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Abstract

Cultural intelligence (CQ) as a key social skill is determinant in regulating cultural encounters. It allows an accurate interpretation of verbal and non-verbal messages which in its turn contributes to reducing communication mistakes. crucially, social interactions within the context of a host's culture become smooth because CQ enables individuals to adjust their communication style and behavior to their new circle of interaction. The acquirable nature of CQ is what makes it useful and adaptable to different fields like education, business, tourism and more. To this end, exposing higher education students to international experiences is likely to foster their interpersonal communication skills through challenging their mental capacities. Adopting sociocultural theory was relevant in this regard to highlight the significance of social interaction in shaping the cognitive abilities of people.

Keywords: Cultural intelligence, communication, cross-cultural competence, ethnorelativism.

Résumé

L'intelligence culturelle (CQ), véritable pivot des compétences sociales, joue un rôle déterminant dans la régulation des échanges interculturels. Elle permet une interprétation fine des messages verbaux et non verbaux, ce qui réduit considérablement les malentendus. Plus encore, elle fluidifie les rapports sociaux au sein d'une culture d'accueil, car elle offre aux individus la flexibilité nécessaire pour ajuster leur style de communication et leur comportement à leur nouvel environnement. C'est justement ce caractère évolutif et acquis de la CQ qui la rend si précieuse et adaptable à des secteurs variés, tels que l'éducation, les affaires ou le tourisme. Dans cette optique, l'immersion des étudiants du supérieur dans des expériences internationales est un levier majeur pour renforcer leurs facultés de communication en stimulant leurs capacités cognitives. L'adoption de la théorie socioculturelle s'avère ici particulièrement pertinente pour mettre en lumière l'influence de l'interaction sociale sur le développement des fonctions mentales.

Mots-clés : Intelligence culturelle, communication, compétence interculturelle, ethnorélativisme.

Introduction:

The primary objective of this paper is to construct cross-cultural competence through exposing higher education students to international experiences. Real social interactions will bring participants face-to face with the reality of difference. Given that the person's cultural background influences their communication style, their participation within a social interaction is likely to provoke their mental capacities to rethink their interpretation of the newly perceived reality. Thus, decoding the social structure enables the person to adapt mentally to integrate the new social context. This interdependence of the person's cognitive abilities and interacting with socially more competent people (natives) makes CQ acquirable and likely to be developed and reinforced through practice and membership. Importantly, CQ by definition is an individual's ability to behave appropriately and react effectively to unfamiliar situations arising from culturally diverse environments. It is, therefore, a malleable social skill that one can develop through repeated engagement in real-life situations and interaction with people who have greater cultural competence.

As this paper aims to investigate the role of international experiences in polishing higher education students' intercultural capacities, it is of primary importance to pose the following research questions:

- 0- How can scaffolded interactions within a specific cultural community mediate higher education students' intercultural capacities?
- 1- To what extent can CQ help higher education students develop in a multicultural milieu?

This study is based on a theoretical research design, exploiting qualitative conceptual analysis to explore the acquirable nature of Cultural Intelligence (CQ). To this end, the primary objective is to evaluate its potential impact on the international experiences of higher education students. Approaching CQ through a sociocultural lens is highly relevant, as this skill is acquirable rather than innate; it is developed through social membership and interactions within a specific cultural community. Thus, higher education students are able to develop this intelligence through engaging in international experiences and scaffolded interactions with native speakers.

1- Cultural Intelligence: The significance of its acquirable nature:

There is no doubt that the world is metaphorically a village which is getting smaller and smaller. Many countries have become popular destinations for those looking for better life opportunities. These destinations have been transformed into multicultural environments where



people with different educational backgrounds and from diverse social classes are obliged to interact every day. Success in a multicultural milieu requires students to be flexible when dealing with situations that sound strange and to adjust their prior knowledge to newly perceived behaviors. To successfully integrate a group of people one should decipher its communicative codes to comprehend what essentially governs its interactive principles. Understanding the process of interaction within a given group is achievable when the individual effectively applies his mental processes to interpret and make sense of observed situations. People, undoubtedly, are able to become competent members within a new social environment as their social competence can be developed after repeatedly contacting more competent members from the same circle of interaction.

The individual's construction of their familiarity with the new context of interaction is based in the first place on observation and contact. Thus, conceptualizing those ideological components essential to any social interaction, may allow communicants to build trust when dealing with each other. Ideology, in this sense, refers to the shared beliefs, norms and conventions that guide social interactions and reflect how society functions (Hall, 1996). More to the point, conceptualizing ideology is significant in the sense that it reveals how society maintains its order and encodes its understanding of hierarchical relations (Van Dijk, 1998). Contacting more competent members of a given community is likely to assist individuals to become aware of those codes and thus to open their mind borders to make sense of unfamiliar behaviors.

This cross-cultural adaptation cannot happen unless people are able to tolerate differences and fight their inner tendency to remain ethnocentric. Ethnocentrism associates cultural differences with negative intentions and thereby makes culturally different people unworthy of trust. Importantly, As Norman Daniels stated, "when differences aren't perceived as differences, they are perceived as right and wrong" (as cited in Lee & Rogan, 1995, p. 242).

Living together and working together necessitate that students learn to communicate across cultures by developing a cross-cultural competency. In doing so, their mental capacities are likely to be challenged with the purpose of overcoming their psychological boundaries and feeling motivated to increase their productivity. Bandura (2002) emphasizes the interdependence of social structures and the individual's freedom in social development:

In the social cognitive theory of self and society (Bandura, 1986, 2001) personal agency and social structure operate interdependently rather than as disembodied

entities. Personal agency operates within a broad network of socio-structural influences. (Bandura, 2002, p. 278)

Drawing on Bandura's perspective, the individual is free to act, visualize their own objectives, react to specific situations but within the limitations of social structures. This is because social institutions prescribe norms and rules on the individual's actions with the aim of controlling and orienting them. However, individuals and through their active involvement in social interactions are able to challenge social structures and thereby contribute to its change. Individuals given that they are the product of a particular social structure utilize their prior knowledge in parallel with the newly perceived culture to produce a hybrid social structure. Importantly, "People are producers as well as products of social systems. Social structures are created by human activity to organize, guide, and regulate affairs in given domains by authorized rules and sanctions" (Giddens, 1984, as cited in Bandura, 2002, p. 278).

People, wherever they may exist or live, are able to create their 'mutual reality' and develop an appropriate understanding of things around them if they resist their tendency of being ethnocentric. Being open to different perspectives on life and people allow individuals to develop a sense of appreciation of cultural differences since this open-mindedness is their stepping stone towards ethnorelativism. Thus, when individuals become open to cultural differences and think relatively with regard to unfamiliar behaviors, they no longer judge other cultures based on their own standards, they rather get to know themselves better through contacting what makes others different. This self-discovery results in constructing a cross-cultural competency allowing people from different cultural backgrounds to coexist peacefully within an environment characterized by mutual understanding and productivity.

The need for a cross-cultural competency has become very urgent nowadays. Globalizing cultures, through the globalization of markets, literary production and even political decisions, brings to the light the significant role of intercultural communication in reducing cultural clashes and conflicts. Bandura was aware of the importance intercultural communication has in light of the globalized reality of the world:

Because of extensive global interconnectedness the actions of forces operating remotely now produce local effects. What happens economically and politically in one part of the world can affect the lives of vast populations elsewhere (Bandura, 2002, p.283).



As explained by Bandura, globalization has transformed local economic and political problems into global ones with concrete consequences all over the world. Importantly, the globalized economy created the need for international companies and world producers to look for new markets with the aim of increasing the level of consumption. To this end, cross-cultural communication is key to successfully globalize business ideas and to convince clients from all over the world to consume local products.

Cross-cultural communication should be at the heart of the globalized reality of the world as the avoidance of communication mistakes either locally or globally is achievable especially when observation-based knowledge takes over stereotypes. Stereotyping is the act of reducing a group of people to an oversimplified belief or image disregarding the unique differences of its members. Zaharna (1995) highlights the negative impact of stereotypes and generalizations on the communication patterns between Arabs and Americans:

The recent focus on Islam as “militant” or “violent” has fed concerns of many Arabs who are Moslems. The result of such negative experiences and the concern for the American audience’s perception of them may make some Arabs skeptical of dealing with the American media and public. It may make them even more skeptical of claims of American “ethics” and “objectivity. (Zaharna, 1995, p. 252)

There is no doubt that such generalized images and stereotypes about groups of people are not only far from the truth but they encourage conflicts and dissipate trust among people and nations. Cross-cultural communication does not come up with fixed ideas and perceptions about people but it focuses on finding a possible contact-zone between cultures so as to create a healthy atmosphere for co-existence.

The unprecedented waves of globalization that have invaded the world should urge us to impart some sort of behavioral change to our reactions towards those human acts perceived as unfamiliar or doubtful. The implementation of intercultural competence in higher education is relevant today as it will help students develop both psychologically and socially. Exposing them to international experiences is likely to reinforce their cultural intelligence through adjusting to new social environments. In doing so, students will learn to taste the beauty of different cultures and that being different should not be seen as an obstacle to sharing skills, exchanging opinions and working together.

2- Cultural Intelligence: Construction and applicability

This paper aims at promoting intercultural competence among people from different ethnic/racial groups working in a multicultural environment. To this end, Cultural intelligence can be reinforced to provide communicants with the necessary tools to help them coping with the different cultural elements that may contradict their own. This is because communication gets complicated especially when issues like religion, gender, and race are involved. Being narrow-minded or culturally incompetent may turn what was expected to be a context of communication and exchange into a one of misunderstanding and conflict. A culturally narrow-minded person is usually unable to build their understanding of cultures on a culturally relative approach. They rather adopt an ethnocentric attitude as they judge the host culture based on their culture's standards.

Drawing on cultural relativism as an approach to dealing with cultural differences, cultural intelligence if effectively reinforced is likely to push communicants to free their minds from ethnocentric ideas and be open for collaborating with their environment. Importantly, CQ by definition is the individual's ability to work effectively and behave adequately within a multicultural environment (Earley & Ang, 2003). Integrating into the host culture has positive consequences, allowing sojourners and expatriates to feel better about themselves by building trust with hosts (Church, 1982). In doing so, their appreciation of hosts increases as they develop positive attitudes toward their hosts' culture. Given the positive effects CQ has on human relationships, people's self-worth will potentially improve both personally and professionally. As for the personal level, their psychological adjustment allows them to feel satisfied when dealing with hosts since their stress levels decrease. Accordingly, the professional level gets improved because when people acquire culturally adequate behaviors and social skills, their work/academic performance experiences distinct improvement.

It is worth noting that CQ is acquirable by virtue of one's interaction with people and situations pertaining to an international experience. Thus, people become culturally competent as they are more likely to improve and develop their social skills by being involved in international experiences (Lave & Wenger, 1991). From this perspective, applying the ideas of sociocultural theory is relevant since CQ is a mental capacity that becomes stronger when individuals interact with natives. This interaction with natives is likely to develop CQ because it exposes the individual to culturally competent people. This interaction provides communicants with the social contexts where their CQ can be challenged and thereby grow.

Sociocultural theory, accordingly, stresses the importance of communication and the big role social interaction plays in the development of people's mental capacities (Vygotsky, 1962). Crucially, CQ is based on metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioral aspects with a high level of flexibility to function in multicultural contexts (Earley & Ang, 2003). As such, people's mental processes develop by applying their prior knowledge to dealing with new situations that arise from social interactions. This contact that utilizes such mental features to accommodate new social experiences results in forging hybrid experiences (Bhabha, 1994). Given this 'third space' created out of merging old perspectives into new ones, people become more knowledgeable about the world as their prior knowledge whether about themselves or about others is constantly challenged by repeatedly experiencing new contexts of interactions.

Vygotsky (1962) emphasized that human development mainly at the psychological level happens when people interact with each other and learn from one another. The individual's membership within a social environment equips them with the necessary social mechanisms to deal with different social situations in various social contexts. The mental processes of people, therefore, improve only when they are involved in real life experiences that expose them to specific patterns of interaction and social practices. Importantly, the mind can be defined as a complex set of capacities that cluster together to conceptualize and interpret experiences (Kant, 1951). This mental capacity develops by its repeated exposure to challenging situations emerging from new experiences.

This acquirable nature of CQ is likely to turn any context of interaction into a constructive field for higher education students to learn how to communicate across cultures. Accordingly, integrating programs and activities that promote understanding across cultures is likely to prepare higher education students to become global citizens. In doing so, students will become aware of their responsibility as representatives of their own culture and their role as engaged members to help solve global problems. Cultivating this cross-cultural competency in students necessitates exposing them to real life situations where they can develop their CQ. To this end, integrating programs that display cultural differences and engaging students in intercultural exchange programs (Lyu, 2023) can put them on solid ground to learn how to become cross-culturally competent. Specifically, Marsee and Pineda Hoyos (2025) demonstrates that collaborative online international learning (COIL) projects provided a scaffolded learning environment where students could develop their intercultural capacities. Their interactions with

global peers allowed participants to engage in international experiences and thus become interculturally aware of their roles as global citizens.

Such a cross-cultural competency will enable students to overcome their psychological boundaries and feel motivated to increase their productivity throughout a healthy atmosphere of co-existence with their colleagues when they work within a multicultural milieu. Teaching Cross-cultural communication via putting higher education students into real situations is at the heart of my vision. This is because social contexts of interaction will encourage students to rethink their previously formed perspectives by utilizing their mental capacities to conceptualize perceived behaviors. This close contact with people from foreign cultures is likely to help students develop their CQ and thereby learn to communicate across cultures. This active involvement of students in international experiences is constructive as it contributes to reducing the risks of making communication mistakes and forming a holistic view of the world.

Conclusion:

Cross-cultural communication as a skill is key to break away from stereotyping foreign cultures in terms of their way of life, reactions to different situations and social norms. Cultivating this skill is of great importance within higher education to mentally prepare students for functioning effectively in a multicultural context. For higher education students to guarantee a successful integration within working environments characterized by cultural diversity, they should learn to adapt their communication style to any context of interaction. Their exposure to experiences involving different communication styles is likely to familiarize their mental processes with the changes that occur when the context of interaction differs. Thus, because CQ is an acquirable skill, it is an effective means of preparing higher education students for success in culturally diverse working environments. This is because when they learn to communicate across cultures, they become global citizens working to challenge intolerance and stereotypes.

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