

Developing Intercultural Competence Through Mediated Triple-Intercultural Classroom Collaboration

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Abstract

Intercultural competence (ICC) describes individuals' ability to effectively interact with people of other cultures in an appropriate manner. Institutions of higher education around the world are invested in developing the ICC of their students and to this end encourage participation in study abroad programs while simultaneously internationalizing the student population of their institutions. Towards this goal, more recently, faculty have been asked to internationalize curricula contextually and experientially to develop student ICC in the classroom. This article offers an experiential and pedagogical approach for faculty to consider in this initiative. This approach involves mediated collaboration, utilizing standard and social media platforms to allow communication between three diverse global classroom communities providing students with comprehensive intercultural experiences. This approach was utilized in Fall 2013 with 105 students combined from the USA, Romania, and Fiji, and resulted in a rich experience for all participants. The ICC development of the 35 students from the USA was measured over the semester using an ICC assessment tool and results concluded impressive growth. With access to mobility imposing limits on student travel, it is critical that higher education look to alternative methods, such as the one described in this paper, to develop student ICC.

Introduction

Students in higher education are often encouraged to enroll in courses that will help them develop their intercultural competence (ICC) so they will be better prepared to engage in the global community upon graduation. For the purpose of this paper, this definition of ICC will be used:

Intercultural competence is the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioral orientations to the world. These orientations will most commonly be reflected in such normative categories as nationality, race, ethnicity, tribe, religion, or region (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009, p. 7).

Intercultural communication curriculum is offered at many higher education institutions around the globe with development and improvement of student ICC among its list of desired learning outcomes. Many institutions have utilized study abroad programs to provide opportunities for students to experience cultural immersion and without a

doubt this has enabled students to experience first hand, different cultures, which has been proven to impact ICC development. UNESCO states,

At least 3.6 million students in 2010 were enrolled in tertiary education abroad, up from 2 million in 2000. East Asia and the Pacific is the largest source of international students, representing 28% of the global total. Students from China make up one-half of this figure, or 17% of the total. The United States, Australia, and Japan are their main destinations for study. North America and Western Europe follows, accounting for 15% of those going abroad (UIS, 2014).

Though the number of students around the globe engaged in studying abroad has increased significantly over the past decade, NAFSA reports that just 1% of U.S. students traveled abroad in 2011/2012 for academic purposes (NAFSA, 2013) with reasons commonly attributed to lack of access, high cost and availability of time. With this in mind, the onus is on professors in U.S. higher education and around the world to internationalize their curriculum to afford students the opportunity to learn about different cultures without traveling. Of the 1% or 283,332 U.S. student participants, 64.8% were female and 76.4% were Caucasian (Institute of International Education, 2013) indicating that a rather narrow segment of U.S. students are actually studying abroad. This data provides incentive for teachers to consider other means of developing their students' ICC, one that does not require travel, can reach the masses, is inexpensive and easy to execute.

This paper describes an experiential and pedagogical approach to interculturalizing curricula using mediated collaboration between three diverse global classroom communities. Access to mobility need not hinder ICC development as triple-intercultural mediated classroom collaboration can advantageously affect learning outcomes in regard to intercultural skill development. Outlined in the following paper is a review of one such collaboration between students in the United States, Romania and Fiji. Additional content includes how faculty can create a triple-intercultural mediated classroom collaboration and considerations for introducing this concept to students. Technology as a medium can be a powerful tool in creating intercultural experiences for students across the globe.

Use of mediated intercultural collaboration in ICC development

According to NAFSA, "The United States sends far fewer students abroad to study than it receives from other countries to study in the United States" (Johnson, 2013). The influx of international students entering U.S. classrooms provides one aspect of internationalizing classrooms, but course content and classroom experiences need to embrace internationalization as well. Pedagogy often includes students reading culturally rich texts and viewing cultural documentaries in an effort to provide relevant worldview content and context. These methods however, are rather one-dimensional, as they do not allow students to bridge what they are learning with practical communication experiences. Thus, the learning can be considered limited because they are not given the opportunity to transfer what they have read, discussed and viewed to real intercultural situations. The result is students have learned cultural theories and expanded their knowledge of global cultures, but they have not personally experienced intercultural communication.

The ability to effectively communicate with people from cultures different from one's own is not natural for many, but a capacity that needs to be acquired and practiced. Interpersonal communication, the ability to send a message so that the receiver decodes the intended message correctly, is made more challenging when a sender and receiver share little by way of cultural similarities.

Contact with other languages and cultures provides an excellent opportunity to foster the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC, or intercultural competence, for short). Once intercultural contact has begun, ICC development generally evolves as an on-going and lengthy process, occasionally with periods of regression or stagnation, but more commonly with positive results and no end point. (Fantini, 2005, p.1).

A course that states its learning outcome is to develop ICC should provide students with access to intercultural communication experiences between its students and those from another culture(s). The use of mediation provides access for such learning experiences to take place. "Internationalization has to join forces with new technologies and employment in general. Combining this in practical applied studies, the entrepreneurs of tomorrow learn the use of modern technologies and the interconnection with a variety of people from different cultural backgrounds" (Ullrich, 2013, p.66).

Triple-intercultural mediated classroom collaboration vs. traditional mediated intercultural classroom collaboration

Mediated intercultural classroom collaboration allows students to experience other cultures without leaving home. Paired with a class from another culture, students can work either 1:1 with their respective cultural partners or as whole-classes (WC) working together. Many classrooms around the world are engaging in 'dual-intercultural collaboration'—two classrooms, two cultures. A new concept for consideration is 'triple-intercultural collaboration', bringing three classrooms and three cultures together. The benefits of using this model are multifaceted as students in a triple-intercultural collaborative environment are able to learn about two cultures simultaneously, acquiring, strengthening and using intercultural communication skills among an even more diverse group of students. As with the dual-intercultural model, professors from three classes can choose which pairings (individual or WC) would be most beneficial for particular assignments. The addition of a third class, does make structuring the course more challenging, but careful preparation (see Process below) provides for smooth execution. The benefits of involving three classrooms are two-fold:

1. Student ICC development takes on a more multi-cultural focus, allowing for engagement with a myriad of cultural dimensions, and
2. WC discussions are made richer with additional multi-cultural perspectives. WC discussions using common materials such as texts and films as prompts, allow students to share how they all perceive social issues, traditions and beliefs in real-

time. Whether 1:1 or WC, the exchanges offer students an experiential opportunity to understand and learn about others' cultures.

Triple-intercultural classroom collaboration experience review

During the Fall Semester 2013, in an effort to pilot a triple-intercultural experience for students enrolled in Intercultural Communication at Emerson College, United States, I partnered with two professors, one at the University of the South Pacific, Fiji and the other at Petroleum-Gas University, Romania. This partnership amongst the three of us required much collaboration to create assignments and activities that would be beneficial for all 105 students involved (35 per class). Our academic disciplines were not the same, but there was an overlap in the desire to foster greater ICC amongst our students. This commonality proved to be the incentive for all three of us to work collaboratively.

As intercultural communication expert Darla K. Deardorff states, "It is through impactful experiences, where people are challenged to make sense of their new environment and accommodate to the differences, where they ultimately gain more sophisticated knowledge about other people and a feeling of being at home in a new context" (Deardorff, 2009, p.16). As previously described, mobility to travel abroad is not an option for all, and most of the students involved in these three classes had little opportunity for this. Thus, this virtual triple-intercultural exchange opportunity was attractive to these professors and their students.

The following outlines the steps followed to create the triple-cross-cultural classroom collaboration:

Step 1. Development of Triple-Intercultural Collaboration Partnerships

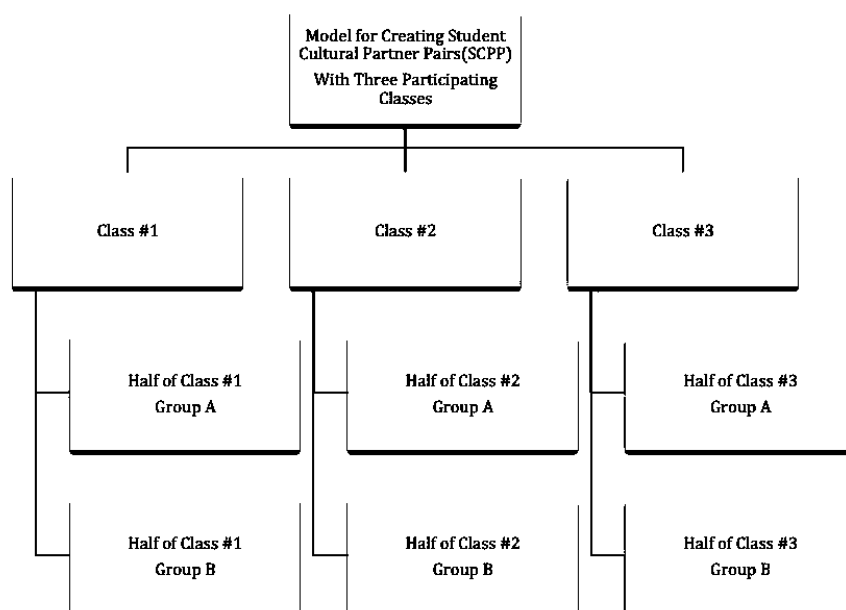
- i. *Initiated a Query.* Located two professors outside of the United States with whom to form a collaborative partnership. Utilized LinkedIn to obtain these partners. LinkedIn, the Google+ Community Cross-Cultural Higher Education Collaboration and/or professional organizations are available to search for professors with whom to collaborate. Each respondent was interviewed to confirm common interests, student enrollment numbers and coordination of semester dates. Ultimately two professors, one from Romania and one from Fiji were selected.
- ii. Began collaborating with the two other professors two months prior to the start of the semester to create assignments/projects and develop a timeline that worked for all classes. We utilized Google Documents, a shared online document platform and met online using Google Hangout to establish a working relationship. We divided the development of the assignments/projects between us and allowed feedback to be shared. We agreed on collaborative assignments for our students and additionally decided that we would:
 - a. Require that each student create and maintain a Communication Journal, "The process of exploring how journals assist their writers learn is commonly described in terms of how they can enhance reflection and reflective practice. Reflection has been described as a process of turning

experience into learning. That is, of exploring experience in order to learn new things from it” (Boud, 2001, p.2).

- b. Schedule time in our classrooms to share and discuss collaborative experiences.
- c. Create a survey to elicit formal feedback requiring students to reflect on challenges and successes of their cross-cultural collaboration experience.

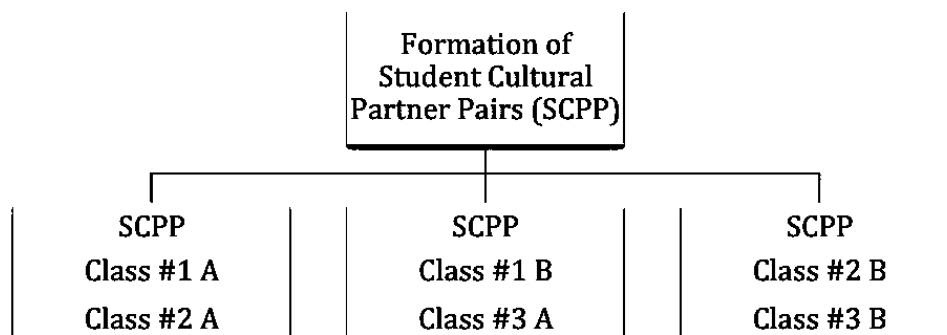
iii. Created Student Cultural Partner Pairs (Figure 1)

Each of the three classes were divided in half, forming groups A and B.



Formed Student 1:1 Cultural Partner Pairs (SCPP) (Figure 2)

To pair students, half of each class was paired with half of one of the other classes.



- iv. Created a list of the SCPPs on our shared document platform and inserted email addresses for each student. These email addresses were provided to students when actual student collaboration began.

Step 2. Introducing Triple-Intercultural Collaboration in the Classroom

- i. Administered the Intercultural Development Inventory® (IDI®) as an intercultural competence pre-assessment test to the U.S. students to assess their baseline ICC prior to the start of the triple-intercultural collaboration. This allowed for the assessment of learning outcomes at the end of the semester.
- ii. Introduced the Triple-Intercultural Partnership concept to students; purpose, upcoming collaborative assignments, expectations, and discussed briefly which countries/cultures the class would be collaborating with. Instructed students how to create and format their Communication Journals in which they would record an entry each time they attempted to contact their Student Cultural Partner (SCP) or received a message from their SCP. Considerations for journal entries included – modes of communication used, dates/time between messages sent and responses received, reflections of challenges and successes, needs for clarification (content and context), language, gender issues, religious issues, and general thoughts about their interactions.
- iii. On the predetermined start date, provided each student with the email address of their SCP and instructed students to initiate contact with their SCPs by introducing themselves. Allowed two weeks before providing the first assignment for students to get to know one another. In addition, allowed students to decide independently, with their SCP how they would prefer to contact one another for future interactions—choices usually included email or Facebook. Time zone differences created a challenge for students, but as this is part of negotiating ICC, students were left to navigate this independently.
- iv. Provided students with their first assignment. The first assignment, an interview detailing life-cycle practices and their corresponding cultural significance allowed 1:1 interaction between SCPs and encouraged SCPs to learn about each other's cultures. The assignment had a due date that all students (in all three classes) were expected to adhere to and they were explicitly told that they were to be active communicators in this process. Collected the assignments and graded them accordingly. Collected the Communication Journals at this time as well as part of the assignment.
- v. Provided students with their second assignment. This assignment allowed students to interact as WCs. Students from all three classes entered into a group discussion about the documentary, *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* (Roco Films Educational), viewed by all the same week. The interactions were free flowing and remained open for a period of three weeks to allow time for development. The online platform, a private Facebook Group, was created and utilized for this discussion, as it was a platform available to all students. NOTE: Students in China do not have access to Facebook, therefore if partnering with classes in China, a joint Google Document or the creation of a private Google+ Community could be used instead.

- vi. Once all assignments/projects concluded, an online survey was posted for students to complete.
- vii. Administered the Intercultural Development Inventory® (IDI®) as a post-intercultural competence assessment to ascertain learning outcomes for the U.S. students.

Discussion of ICC Learning Outcomes and Limitations of the Triple-Intercultural Collaboration

The purpose of this study was to discover whether mediated intercultural collaboration between students from three diverse cultures could affect the development of intercultural communication competence as much as students traveling abroad to study. The inspiration for the concept was based on the frequent lack of mobility most students encounter in regard to the ability to study abroad. As described in this paper, students from the United States, Romania and Fiji collaborated throughout a semester via mediated means to unite in studying. Common assignments were used by the three professors from each of the three institutions of higher education. The assignments focused on discovery of the other cultures' traditions, beliefs and values whilst encouraging the students to become acquainted on a personal level. Each student maintained a communication journal that outlined their intercultural communication experiences detailing the challenges and successes of their interactions. These journals provided context to the experiences and were submitted to the professors with the assignments. The evaluation of this experience as a comparable means to engage students interculturally to improve ICC was measured using the Intercultural Development Inventory® (IDI®).

To establish learning outcomes among students in the Emerson College course (n=35), the Intercultural Development Inventory® (IDI®) was administered as a pre-assessment at the start of the Fall semester and again at the end of the semester as a post-assessment. I, Cathryn Edelstein have obtained a license to use the IDI® from IDI, LLC. "The Intercultural Development Inventory® (IDI®) is a statistically reliable, cross-culturally valid measure of intercultural competence adapted from the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity" (Hammer, 2011). The Pre-Assessment IDI® Group Profile reflected Perceived Orientation (PO) in the range of Acceptance 122.28, Developmental Orientation (DO) in the range of Minimization 95.46 and a Cultural Disengagement Resolved score of 4.10. The Post-Assessment IDI® Group Profile reflected Perceived Orientation (PO) in the range of Acceptance 125.38, Developmental Orientation (DO) in the range of Minimization 102.19 and a Cultural Disengagement Resolved score of 4.27. (visit www.idiinventory.com for more information regarding the IDI® Assessment) The results show an impressive group growth of 6.73 (DO) points in the students' overall intercultural competence. The evidenced increase of 6.73 points in one semester of the group's DO is quite meaningful when compared to a 2-point increase that was realized among students who participated in an AFS 10-month study abroad program living with host families (Hammer, 2005). According to that study by Hammer in 2005 for the AFS Study Abroad Experience, "The AFS students as a group improved their DS [Developmental Score] by 2 points" (Hammer, 2005).

Conclusion

Changes in attitude and improvement of ICC skills occur over time through practice and experience. It is imperative that intercultural communication experiences become a part of ICC pedagogy, and it is the responsibility of teachers to create curriculum for this to occur. Faculty is most often the innovator of curriculum and most certainly the group responsible for delivering curriculum to students. As put forth in this paper, the opportunity to create a triple-intercultural collaboration initiative can be made available to students in any classroom, anywhere internet access and a common language exist between the participants. The collaboration is essentially cost-free (except for internet access), straightforward in its design, and uncomplicated to execute. Approval by administrators should be fairly effortless as the gain in ICC and the rich experience for students are primary considerations for any successful curricular endeavor.

Finally, it should be higher education's mission to educate students to enter the world prepared and engaged intellectually, culturally and mindfully. With technology/mediation as a viable vehicle to engage with cultures across the globe, lack of access to mobility is no longer justifiable as a reason for students not to collaborate cross-culturally. "Global learning is the combination of global reach, achieved through the use of modern technologies, and global perspectives, arising from the interaction of students and faculty living in different countries, to produce a global graduate for a global workforce" (Rimington, 2003, p.1). The workforce of the future needs people with strong ICC skills. For this to occur, it is faculty who must create pedagogy to accomplish this. "Taking advantage of the affordances of networking technologies that are cross borders, teachers have more opportunities to establish a cross-cultural online learning environment" (Wang, 2011, p.244). Utilization of the triple-intercultural collaboration model provides an appropriate, supportive and explorative structure for students' ICC skills to grow through mediated real-time communication.

Limitations

The triple-intercultural collaboration initiative described in this article was a portion of the overall pedagogy, which additionally included research assignments with presentations, assigned readings, viewing of multiple videos and documentaries, presentations by visitors from other cultures and in-class exercises and lectures unrelated to the collaboration. With this in mind, the changes in the IDI® results cannot be attributed solely to the triple-intercultural collaborative experiences. Past semesters, during which triple-intercultural collaboration was not part of the pedagogy, the IDI® was not administered, thus data that shows the impact of the triple-intercultural collaboration on IDI® outcomes is not available.

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