

STORYTELLING AS A VEHICLE FOR SELF-AWARENESS: ESTABLISHING A FOUNDATION FOR INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCY DEVELOPMENT

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Intercultural competence and the ability to work with diverse populations are critical for successful experiences abroad. Immersion has been identified as a strong preparatory and developmental opportunity for learners engaging in these experiences. However the increasing cost of higher education and the depletion of federal support for these programs have forced educators to employ innovative means to prepare students for international experiences. The authors address this charge via theoretical perspectives suggesting the inclusion of storytelling and narrative as a means of developing self-awareness and a pathway towards intercultural competence. This perspective provides the foundation for global competency development in non-immersive contexts with respect to the underlying financial limitations in the current higher education landscape. The authors provide an educational framework that has the potential for a renewed emphasis on self-development and ultimately, the creation of more globally conscious study abroad learners.

Introduction

The need for intercultural competence has risen due to the increase of economic ties in global markets. Hence the priority for development of these competencies has concurrently risen in higher education. For business, leadership, nonprofit management, agricultural development, anthropology, and in countless other disciplines, the need becomes paramount to

develop intercultural competency in those that serve the diverse population of the world. Intercultural competence is “fundamental to education, perhaps always has been so, but is all the more significant in the contemporary world” (Alred, Byram, & Fleming, 2003, p. 6). Van Deurzen (1998) describes the importance of intercultural competence: “We can become better strangers to each other and thus better known to each

other and ourselves” (p. 81). The purpose of developing one’s intercultural competence is not necessarily trying to change the values of the speaker, but alter their conscious to evaluate their response to others in intercultural situations (Byram, Nichols, & Stevens, 2001).

However, with respect to the competing priorities for resources and general lack of funding devoted to study-abroad programs and immersion programs, the cost of developing intercultural competence through global contexts often falls to learners. In fact, the globalization of market forces has forced the reduction of per capita public funding to higher education, despite the continuing increase in student enrollments, leading to the current fiscal crisis of higher education (Yang, 2003). Most notably, higher education is being held to higher levels of accountability for how its diminishing portion of public financial support is spent (Altbach, 1997). Together, these provide the foundation for an environment aimed at the reduction of learner support.

This arrangement produces a stratified system of opportunity based on socioeconomic privilege for higher education learners as they attempt to impact and travel within international communities. The days when financial options such as the Pell Grant covered close to 80% of students’ direct costs are gone, replaced by today’s grant averages covering only 30% of tuition, room, and board, leaving students to rely heavily on loans (Difelicianantonio, 2008). This does not mean, however, that opportunity for a learner to develop intercultural competence is gone. Rather, the situation forms the foundation for an educational calling, challenging educators to think creatively to address this conundrum. It forces a shift in the paradigm for how educators develop intercultural competence and calls for an exploration of alternative methodologies to support this priority.

A creative framework that may contribute to intercultural competence may be found in the art and practice of storytelling. Storytelling and the use of narrative as a means of understanding oneself can be a powerful innovation to meet this challenge. It is the contention of the authors that through the use of storytelling, learners can begin to develop their self-identity and an understanding for the emotions that support it in both the micro and macro global contexts. This creates the impetus for continued self-discovery and self-awareness, which is

the foundation for openness and the development pathway of intercultural competence. The current article explores the concept by contextualizing intercultural competence, examining the utility of storytelling, and ultimately providing a framework for using storytelling as a vehicle for self-awareness and self-development with learners.

Theoretical and Conceptual Foundation

DEFINING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

Byram, Nichols, and Stevens (2001) suggested that there are several components of intercultural competence that must be considered, including knowledge, skills, and attitudes. All of these components are ultimately “complemented by the values one holds because of one’s belonging to a given society” (2001, p. 5). It becomes necessary to recognize how an individual associates with their given culture in order to become more fully competent in one’s assessment and confrontation within intercultural situations.

Alred et al. (2003) argued a clear distinction between an intercultural experience and being intercultural (obtaining intercultural competence). *Becoming intercultural* is only created when socialized groups that see their values and beliefs as *natural* begin to question these commonalities through intercultural situations (Alred et al., 2003). The members of the group begin to place judgment about intercultural encounters and reflect among relationships within the group. Through this awareness and analysis of experiences, the individual begins to develop intercultural competence, or, as the researchers coin, the members *become intercultural*.

There are several common themes linking research among intercultural competency, including an idea of progress, foreign language as unnecessary, and the importance of maintaining relationships. One common theme throughout research identifies intercultural competence as a progressive action. Many researchers have identified intercultural competence as continual (Alred et al., 2003) and developmental (Beamer, 1992). Such theories suggest that the completion of intercultural competence is nonexistent and is a consistent reevaluation process of one’s own and others’ cultures.

Another common theme is the concept that fluency is simply not enough. Understanding intercultural relationships and their development requires more than the comprehension of the given foreign language. Because individuals have different lifestyles and experiences, as well as attribute meaning differently, Alred et al. (2003) argued that one should not simply use words to convey meaning; therefore, learning the language is not enough. Byram (1997) suggested that language itself is not necessarily important, but a more general understanding of the society as a whole is. Such understanding can be accomplished through the study of geography, history, or literature in order to achieve intercultural communicative competency. Byram also articulates this point by breaking down language even further into a general exchange of information. The exchange of information is dependent on understanding how individuals in a differing cultural context will perceive one's interactions, responses, writing, and other communications.

Hymes (1983) coined the term *communicative competence* when critiquing several researchers' understandings of competency within intercultural situations. Hymes argued that fluency among linguistics is not the only component in communicative competence, but an equally important component occurs when deciding when to appropriately use such language. Thus, it becomes important to not simply speak the language, but to understand the context in order to fully develop a sociocultural competence (Hymes, 1980).

Intercultural communication goes beyond the verbal language exchange, where foreign language may or may not be a commonality. In a study of the psychology of interpersonal behavior, Argyle (1994) established eight dimensions of nonverbal communication: facial expression, gaze, gestures and other bodily movements, bodily posture, bodily contact, spatial behavior, clothes and appearance, and nonverbal aspects of speech. These dimensions allow for the possibility of confusion beyond differing languages and into the realm of nonverbal cues. Argyle argued, "when people from two different cultures meet, there is infinite scope for misunderstanding and confusion" (p. 189).

A final theme stemming from intercultural competency research is the significance of relationships within

the intercultural situation. *Successful communication*, as addressed by Byram (1997), is not simply in language but in establishing and maintaining relationships. Instead of simply imitating the speaker, it is important to establish and maintain relationships to be able to clearly identify cultural similarities and differences.

Stier (2006) advocated for the necessity of relationships among intercultural competence. Stier suggested that knowledge of the other is found through intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies (later addressed in Beamer's [1992] Learning Development Model). Both competencies offer a variation of perspectives wherein the speaker fully recognizes the other's perspective. Through relationships, the speaker is better equipped to attempt self-reflection, maintain an open mind when faced with cultural differences, uphold effective emotional skills, and avoid automatic assumptions and stereotypes.

THE SELF

Many authors would uphold the importance of starting initially with oneself in the development of intercultural competence. According to Byram et al. (2001), "teaching about one's own culture . . . depends critically on the choice of a starting point" (p. 44). Learning the origins of cultural roots is an essential starting point. Learning the history of one's culture allows the individual to closely examine his or her own perceptions. These perceptions influence communicative responses within intercultural situations. Internal perceptions become the foundation for learning intercultural competence (Brislin, Landis, & Brandt, 1983).

Not only experiences of other cultures, but also critical reflection of one's own cultural identity are becoming more important as a consequence of social change. Landreman (2003) conducted research among students within various theoretical frameworks developed within literature of intercultural competence. Landreman addressed the idea of competency residing among the assumptions of the *intergroup* differences while differentiating this competency from an *intercultural* (instead of multicultural) perspective. Through such differentiation, Landreman (2003) suggested that achieving competence will be reached through interacting with others in a historical and sociocultural-political context, which

ultimately leads to reflection and action. In agreement with Landreman, Alred et al. (2003) conveyed the importance of reflection to fully assess the time spent abroad in intercultural experiences. Reflection on the self and the intercultural situation becomes key to the development of competency.

The importance of intercultural experiences rests in the fact that “individuals gain an understanding of others and of themselves which makes them more conscious of their humanity and more able to reflect upon and question the social conditions in which they live” (Byram, 1997, p. 1). Intercultural competency not only impacts the individuals within the situation, but ultimately has a lasting, external, and societal impact.

More and more frequently, students exiting the university are required to leave in a more knowledgeable and open-minded way, where they can approach given situations effectively and appropriately (Baxter-Magolda & King, 2005). The research of intercultural competency has risen dramatically in its attempt to reach these students and educators to create more successful methods for effectively and appropriately approaching intercultural situations.

The research already conducted on intercultural competence has given students several tools for understanding how to effectively examine intercultural experiences. Through the development of self-identity, reflection, and critique, students are able to better equip themselves for intercultural situations.

Developing the Self Through Storytelling

POWER OF STORYTELLING AND NARRATIVE

Personal narrative is simultaneously born out of experience and gives shape to the experience (Ochs & Capps, 1996). Thus, narrative and the self are inseparable. Self can be broadly understood to be an unfolding, reflective awareness of being-in-the-world, including a sense of one's past and future (Edelman, 1989; Heidegger, 1962) and provides the foundation that stems from the power of storytelling and narrative. Through the communication of the narrative, narrators come to know and understand themselves, apprehend experiences, and navigate relationships with others.

The inseparability of narrative and self is grounded in the phenomenological assumption that entities are given meaning through being experienced (Heidegger, 1962; Husserl, 1931; Merleau-Ponty, 1967; Schutz, 1967) and the notion that narrative is an essential resource in the struggle to bring experiences to conscious awareness (Ochs & Capps, 1996). At any point in time, the sense of that which is given meaning, including ourselves, is an outcome of a person's subjective involvement in the world. Narrative reconciles such involvement for the person, providing shape for how they attend to and feel about events. As narratives are developed, they give rise to the individual's understanding of him- or herself. Morrison (1994) noted, “Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created” (p. 22). Narratives reach out to tap a preexisting identity; they construct a fluid, evolving identity-in-the-making (Crapanzano, 1992; James, 1958; Lifton, 1993).

Further narratives create opportunities for both the narrator and audience to think critically about the life and their agency within it. Narratives may illuminate life by raising challenging questions and exploring them from multiple angles (Havel, 1983; Kundera, 1995). Narrators have the ability to probe beneath the surface, taking their audiences on “an adventurous journey towards a deeper understanding, or rather to a new and deeper question, of ourselves in the world” (Havel, 1983, p. 252). Narratives can transport narrators and their audiences to more authentic feelings, beliefs, and actions and, ultimately, to a more authentic sense of life.

Havel (1983) wrote, “I exist . . . as the tension between all my ‘versions’, for that tension too (and perhaps above all), is me” (p. 155). Narrative is born out of such tension. The narrative activity seeks to bridge a self that felt and acted in the past, a self that feels and acts in the present, and an unanticipated or hypothetical self that is projected to feel and act in some as yet unrealized moment—any one of which may be alienated from the other (Capps & Ochs, 1995a, 1995b; Gramsci, 1971; Kundera, 1995). In a sense, the individual actualizes him- or herself through the activity of narrating.

The development of self-awareness in people is intimately connected to an awareness of other people and things (Havel, 1983; Heidegger, 1962; Mead, 1934; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969; Stern, 1977; Vygotsky, 1978).

People define themselves through the past, present, and future, as well as imagined involvements with people and things. This provides reciprocity as the self extends into these worlds and the world into the self. One of the most important functions of narrative is to situate particular events against a larger horizon of what people consider to be human passions, virtues, philosophies, actions, and relationships (Ochs & Capps, 1996).

APPLICATION TO INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCY DEVELOPMENT

Storytelling and narrative have been used to communicate culture throughout history. However, storytelling and narrative also assist the narrator in understanding themselves through the ethnographic journey of story creation, delivery, and analysis. In an effort to fully understand the power of storytelling, one must first understand the philosophy behind it. Storytelling is grounded in the constructivist view. Its central premise maintains that “world making” is the principal function of the mind, whether its context be the sciences or the arts (Bruner, 2004).

Through its constructivist roots, storytelling and narrative also helps to contextually, specifically, and culturally shape significant events for the narrator. Storytelling characterizes culture by the narrative models it makes available for describing a course of life (Bruner, 2004). Bruner noted, “the tool kit of any culture is replete without canonical life narratives” (p. 694). Self-told life narratives reveal a common formal structure across a wide variety of content which illuminates the essence of its intercultural application (Bruner, 2004). By establishing the self-narrative, which provides the narrator with a culturally manageable framework for understanding who they are, the narrator can begin to develop perspective for the structures that create barriers to openness within their reality.

The beauty of the storytelling is that it allows the narrator to see people and scenes within the narrator’s life as he or she constructs them. By dissecting their own understanding of those that they interact with, the narrators begin to develop a sense of who they are within their constructed reality and the relationships within it. These relationships create meaning for their lives. The advantage is in the narrative’s power and

possibility, not in the “ontology of verification” (Bruner, 2004, p. 702). It does not confirm the worldview, but rather, it provides a deepened sense of perspective that accompanies the past, present, and future that created it. Personal change is made possible, not by peeling back the surface layers to discover people’s deeper, more authentic selves, but by encouraging people to develop a sense of agency (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988; White & Epston, 1991). Agency is embraced through the telling and retelling of the many stories that contributed to the people’s identities. The deepened reflection allows for alternatives and more helpful stories or knowledge for both the narrators and the audiences. Conversations that support people in developing richer and more varied descriptions of their lives offer greater possibilities for rich and diverse meaning-making, rather than meaningless accounts (Bird, 2000).

Through an individual’s narrative, his or her agency and heightened awareness creates the foundation of more authentic and open dialogue with diverse populations. By understanding themselves and the predispositions and biases they possess, individuals can begin to deconstruct expectations and more fully engage in the opportunity to share culture and develop sustainable relationships in international contexts. The ability to understand oneself through narrative provides the foundation for multiplistic perspectives. Such multiplicity essentially forms the foundation for successful intercultural interactions, as it allows for the cultivation of authentic and unbiased dialogue.

USING STORYTELLING AS A VEHICLE FOR SELF-DEVELOPMENT

Storytelling can be a powerful instrument in pedagogy aimed at developing learners who are more self-aware, reflective, and developmentally prepared to engage with international contexts and diverse populations in open and authentic dialogue. On the other hand, the technique, like most educational methodologies that probe into the depths of self-understanding, has to be used skillfully and intentionally toward a purpose with learners.

Educators should seek to deepen and clarify thinking, encourage support from other group members when stories are shared, and help members of the group examine their own stories through intentional

processes. The depth and intensity of the narratives suggest that faculty who are group leaders need to have advanced facilitation skills as well as a keen sense of their own level of self-awareness (Brady, Corbie-Smith, & Branch, 2002). As Bolton (2001) observed, a risk of any reflective activity is uncovering things people do not want to know about themselves. Thus, the process is very intentional, aimed at helping students gain confidence and put into practice what they learn about themselves. A potential risk of such a process is taking people to depths they are not prepared to go. Generally, however, people participating in these exercises will intuitively only go to the point at which they are psychologically comfortable (Bolton, 2001; Brady et al., 2002).

Educators must hold a critical eye toward the language, nonverbals, and rhetoric communicated via the narrative. The struggle for learners is to cultivate both diversity and coherence among potential and actual selves. Hence, specific details of the story become as important as the story itself. The setting is critical, as it shapes and constrains the stories that are told or could be told. The place is not simply a piece of geography, but rather an insightful and descriptive piece of the culture that emerges from the narrative (Bruner, 2004).

Spatial metaphors provide a deepened understanding of the context, rich cultural perspectives, and the narrator's prioritized elements. Things like *in/out*, *here/there*, *coming from/going to*, *place/special place* create perspective and demonstrate the central axis of the narrator's mental model of the experience and supporting culture (Bruner, 2004).

Educators should also be cognizant of the narrators' use of linguistic vehicles like *but* or *however*, as they provide an understanding of the narrators' mental models that create barriers. These barriers have the potential to hinder the openness needed to fully engage with diverse populations. Through a delicate balance of challenge and support, educators have the opportunity to address these barriers and begin to identify opportunities for growth and increased self-awareness.

Conclusions

Storytelling and the use of narrative lead to self-awareness, which is critically important for successful intercultural experiences. The authors believe that the

inclusion of storytelling and narrative as a vehicle for self-awareness creates exceptional utility for the creation of intercultural competence through non-immersive contexts in learners. Through the encouragement of reflective practice through narrative, educators can begin to assist learners to develop an understanding for how experiences influence learning and other aspects of their professional lives (Bolton, 2001; Brookfield, 1990; Mezirow, 1990; Schoen, 1987).

The value of narrative and reflection through storytelling for internationally bound learners is critical to forming a foundation for successful intercultural experiences. Monk, Winslade, Crocket, and Epston (1997) wrote that the use of narrative with practitioners working in their international communities led the practitioners to question and "deconstruct" Western versions of individual potential, "re-authoring" more collectively based stories about how people live their lives that resonate with the stories that the indigenous people told about themselves. Narrative practices are holistically embedded within the specific cultural and historical processes that create the constructs of human potential. In this respect, it is paramount, especially for those involved in complex intercultural conversations about reconciliation between indigenous and nonindigenous peoples, to understand the role that narrative plays in the development of openness and self-awareness (White & Epston, 1991). Such openness has a tremendous potential to allow for understanding between diverse populations and their divergent stories, which delineate their national histories and cultures.

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