Intercultural Competency

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A look at the relationship between learning and culture and the competencies needed in the cross-cultural training setting.

Writing about the importance of cultural contextualization to a group of colleagues who are practically striving to do this as a regular part of ministry, reminds me of the challenge most of us have experienced at some point in youth ministry where we have attempted to talk with parents about rearing teenagers before having done it ourselves. With that in mind, I offer the following paper, hoping that if nothing else, it will help to frame some good discussion and thinking about the challenges and opportunities that come with sharing Christ's Strategy of ministry to the uttermost parts of the globe.

Globalization

The world is a system of change. The change that has taken place in the globe over the last five to ten years is almost immeasurable. During that time the Berlin Wall has fallen, wars in former Yugoslavia, the Middle East and in several African countries have taken many lives, the Soviet Union has dissolved and its republics are being reformed, apartheid has been abolished resulting in a new South Africa, the European community has experienced the harmonization of policies, standards and practices, GATT and NAFTA have been adopted, and this is only the beginning (King and Koller, 1995).

Further, from a modest home computer, one can almost instantly send communication via the Internet to the other side of the globe for the expense of a local phone call. Technology continues to serve as a significant determinant in the evolution of cultures around the globe. Hackman writes, "Technology is a powerful current pulling us irresistibly into a larger stream," (9). With the internationalization of today's world comes a vast array of educational opportunities in diverse contexts transcending cultural and linguistic boundaries. Both profit and non-profit organizations in the United States are attempting to globalize. All of the ministers of education gathered at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Educational Ministerial in August 1992 affirmed that they desire to maintain their respective cultures in this age of internationalization (Education Standards).

To suggest that learning is inextricably tied to culture is not a new principle! Kanungo, a faculty member in the Management Department at McGill University in Montreal says it well: "That cultural differences are a major factor in the satisfaction and motivation of people is by now almost an axiom. However, it is still too often overlooked and, even if one is sensitive to these differences, to manage them remains a very difficult problem" (iii).

Therefore, though educational opportunities in diverse contexts are increasingly accessible all around the globe, much more needs to be understood and done to adapt training to culture. I am seeking to interpret and to further understand the ever-apparent symbiotic relationship between learning and culture. In particular, I am interested in understanding the relationship between interculturally competent educators and the learning that takes place among their students. I am engaged in an ongoing quest to understand this relationship through my research for my dissertation at Michigan State University.

Social Construction of Learning

My interest is in the social construction of adult learning. How do social systems affect the way an adult learns? More specifically, how does one's cultural background influence the way he/she learns? My understanding of the social construction of how, why and what adults learn is captured by a tri-contextual model:

Personal context refers to the unique personality and life journey of each learner. Every student learns differently and does so within the context of his/her life experiences. There is a great deal of literature that explores the impact of an adult's personal context upon what, how and why he/she learns (Brookfield, Cross, Knowles, Kolb).

Much less literature exists that studies the impact of organizational and national contexts upon adult learning. However, both of these contexts play a significant role in shaping how one learns. Organizational context can be defined as the" collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one organization from another" (Hofstede 180). Members of organizations are socialized by the culture of their respective organizations. This affects the learning among the members within that organization. If the learning occurs in an organizational context which is different from the one where the learner participates regularly, there are still different dynamics at work.

The national context refers to the collective programming of the mind which occurs by growing up in a particular country. Nations should not be equated with societies. "Historically, societies are organically developed forms of social organization, and the concept of a common culture applies strictly speaking, more to societies than to nations. Nevertheless, many nations do form holistically developed wholes even if they consist of clearly different groups and even if they contain less integrated minorities" (Hofstede 12). Within nations, there are typically strong integrating forces such as a dominant national language, a common mass media, a national educational system, a national army, a national political system, a national representation in sports events and a national market for certain skills, products and services.

My primary interest is in the influence of national culture upon adult learning, and I am working toward developing a theory of inter cultural competency with practical benefit for us as we train in cross-cultural settings. I define inter cultural competency as the ability to facilitate learning in the cognitive, affective and behavioural domains among learners from cultures different from the trainer's culture.

Any of us who have trained cross-culturally have experienced the challenges of doing so. Even my non-verbals have gotten me into trouble when training overseas. Though I knew better, a couple years ago I used the "okay" sign in Brazil while acknowledging a student's question, forgetting that I had given the symbolic equivalent of the American "middle finger." I have caught myself training with my hands in my pockets in Eastern European countries where that is considered greatly disrespectful; and in some Eastern countries, I have distributed materials with my left hand, which is a taboo in many of those cultures.

Though educational opportunities in diverse contexts are increasingly accessible all around the globe, the complexity of a globalized education mandates intercultural competency on the part of cross-cultural educators. We must not teach Great Commission ministry in a foreign environment the same way as we do at home. We must give careful thought about how to most effectively foster learning about the core principles in each environment. Little credible research appears to exist about what competencies are needed for us as cross-cultural trainers.

Few in education seem to doubt that learning is socially constructed by the culture of the learner. The causal relationship between learning and culture is far-reaching and extremely complex. The ever increasing multiculturalism of society here and abroad has lead to a surge of interest in the relationship between learning and culture (Byram.) Prior to the Fifties, learning theory was of little concern to sociologists. Initially, sociologists began to look at the relationship between learning and culture by studying child rearing practices as a means of developing personality in a respective cultural environment (Altbach).

I am defining culture as the" collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another" (Hofstede 5). It is the way a group signifies reality, develops resources and the way its members express themselves and their normative society.

The literature demonstrates that culture affects the way students learn. For example, Margaret Dennett, who studies the learning styles of adults, finds that the classroom culture sin the US and Canada are largely characterized by participation and discussion. Asian students are taught using a behaviouristic teaching style with limited interaction between the teacher and the student. East Indian students are taught not to question their elders and First Nation people are taught to sit back and listen holistic ally to the "knowledgeable one."

Language is the initial vehicle used to access a culture. Teachers of foreign languages have devoted extensive study to the importance of the cultural context for the learning environment. The native speaker of one language recognizes another language surrounded by her/his own culture and language. Literature in the foreign language education field has emphasized a need for understanding the relationship between learning and culture in approaching language (Swiderski).

Trainers in the human resource arena are also acknowledging the relationship between learning and culture. The world of work is changing. International organizations based in the United States are asking questions like, "How do you build trust among team members in Montreal, San Francisco, Chicago, Bangkok, Tokyo and Singapore who have never met?"

Adapting human resource training to cultures is not only a concern for international organizations. By the year 2000, more than three percent of state side organizations will have a work force of immigrants right here in the United States, and obviously the concentration in urban areas will be far higher (Francis).

Is adult learning theory culturally bound? Stateside adult educators continue to place more and more emphasis upon experiential learning. Consultants who seek to help human resource departments in their training typically suggest active, problem-solving types of contexts for the most effective education of employees. In experiential learning, the focus is upon teaching how to learn rather than upon teaching absolute truths. A learning-centered focus leads to unpredictable outcomes, required a tolerance for ambiguity. This demonstrates the postmodern shift in contemporary adult education among stateside educators. Adult education used to be focused upon disseminating information, usually in a lecture format. Students were expected to master the information taught rather than to develop thinking patterns to teach themselves (Francis). Although experiential training is extremely popular and seemingly effective among stateside adults, one must ask, is experiential training culturally bound?

Hofstede determined that cultures differ among five work-related value dimensions. He developed an index of relative scores for each dimension with about one hundred points between the lowest and highest scoring countries. These valued scores are available for fifty countries and three regions. The dimensions are power distance (one's view of power and authority), individualism (the degree to which individuals function separately), masculinity (the level of clarity of social gender roles), uncertainty avoidance (risk tolerance), and long-term orientation (the perspective of the people toward the future).

Joyce Francis, an instructor at the School of International Service at the American University has taken two of Hofstede's dimensions, power distance and uncertainty avoidance, and uses them to project the cultural relativity of training techniques. She creates a continuum of training techniques with didactic methods on one end and experiential methods on the other (see appendix). She places those countries with high scores in power distance and uncertainty avoidances on the end of the continuum most inclined to sue didactic methods. For the most part, Latin American cultures fall on this end of the continuum; hence Francis suggests training techniques such as readings, panels, lecture, demonstration, etc. in those cultures. At the other end of the continuum, the experiential end, are cultures with low power distance scores and weak uncertainty indices where cultures like the United States and Western European cultures lie with an intuitive base for learning. For these cultures Francis recommends the use of t-groups, fishbowl, simulations, etc. Most Asian cultures are right in the middle of the continuum produced by Francis where she has techniques that include discussion groups, case studies, brainstorming, etc.

What is not clear from Francis' research is whether or not these training techniques are just more comfortable for student in their respective cultures or whether they clearly foster the most effective learning. I have been in situations where I have pushed didactically-oriented cultures to engage in experiential learning. Despite the initial resistance by the students initially, I have often found that learning still occurred. Was the learning that occurred more significant than what would have occurred using didactic techniques? I would like to explore this further. At the same time, my training in these types of situations would have been improved if I had been better prepared for the resistance that accompanied uncomfortable training techniques.

Intercultural Competencies
Given the symbiotic relationship between learning and culture, we as cross-cultural trainers must develop a broad range of competencies beyond what we need when training in our home cultures. Having summarized just a sampling of some of the literature addressing the relationship between learning and culture, what follows are some of the basic competencies we need to develop to be effective when training in cultures different from our own. We need several foundational competencies in knowledge, skills, attitudes and ethical behavior. I have only briefly synthesized a few of the outstanding competencies needed by us in our intercultural training based upon my understanding of this challenging topic.

Knowledge
Many people in ministry discount theory and analysis as impractical and unimportant to teaching an learning as compared to experience. While theory is of little value apart from praxis, our effectiveness will be dependent upon our ability to possess acknowledge base that provides a theoretical framework in areas like the following: Intercultural issues: Knowledge is needed in knowing how to use the inevitable stress that comes with intercultural encounters, with cultural misunderstandings and conflict, as well as factors which promote effective intercultural interaction.

In order to be effective, we must understand and further explore the symbiotic relationship of learning and culture.

Models for assessing learners' needs and learning styles: A number of developmental models exist for developing knowledge of how to assess the cross-cultural learner's needs and learning style. We need to avail themselves to these resources in order to most effectively help learners respond to cultural differences.

Content: Though every educator must have a comprehensive understanding of his or her content area, a breadth of knowledge in one's area is even more important when training cross-culturally. This will help us make the appropriate cultural adaptations. We must be very clear about distinguishing between culture-general and culture-specific elements of content.

Diversity issues: Herein lie some of our greatest challenges as we attempt to assist students in thinking through issues of power, oppression, marginality, etc. We need to be prepared to consider which of these are cultural issues, which are theological issues, etc.

Skills
While important, a knowledge base is not enough for effective intercultural education to occur. The skills of the trainer will turn his or her knowledge base into effective design, implementation and evaluation.

Design: The key word in the skill for design is assessment! Prior to planning for training, it is essential that we assess the learners as a group, in terms of relationship, history, ministry context, etc. We must also be alert to assessing the purpose of the training site host in having us come do training. As in all of this intercultural training, we must remain alert to cultural biases that may be inherent in the assessment tools themselves.

Implementation: Based upon what is gleaned in the assessment, we must work to develop a plan for training which includes goals and objectives. This is where our expertise is essential. While the core principles we are teaching will not change significantly, we must plan very carefully for how to deliver the content. We must be very sensitive to make use of inter cultural communication concepts. Appropriate teaching methods are perhaps where some of the greatest challenges lie in cross-cultural training. We must be creative and strategic about our selection of the pedagogical tools. Empowering and facilitating training participants to be self-directed is essential in all of our contexts.

Evaluation: We need to be skilled in conducting both formative and summative assessments of students, both individually and collectively. We need to find ways to evaluate the progress of learning as it occurs within its immediate context. This requires careful observation on our part and the skill of developing an intuitive sense. The use of long-term evaluative procedures are also essential. We absolutely must consider how effectively we have accomplished our objectives.

Attitude
Far more subjective than competencies is knowledge and skills is the area of attitude. However, attitude competencies are no less important to our success. Intercultural theorists and researchers have identified specific behaviors, values and attitudes related to intercultural competence. Some of the mot important qualities include the following:

Tolerance for ambiguity: Every educational setting has some level of ambiguity. The ambiguity increases exponentially when training cross-culturally. The trainer who is rigid and has unyielding allegiance to his or her training plan, who cannot tolerate unexpected changes, or who is frustrated by students not on track will be ineffective.

Maintain personal cultural identity: One of the greatest mistakes we can make is to try to an extreme, to fit into a foreign culture such that we try to be something we are not. We must have a clear sense of our own cultural identity. Cultural identity refers to the sense we have of our own attitudes, values, beliefs, styles of communication and patterns of behavior.

Patience: Few qualities are as important for the cross-cultural trainer as patience. There are inevitable delays and areas of miscommunication when educating cross-culturally and our response can make the difference of whether these become barriers or further stimuli for learning. Patience is truly a virtue in intercultural education.

Enthusiasm and commitment to content: The level of our enthusiasm and commitment for the content, for the learners and for the entire training experience can make all the difference in the leaner's ability to succeed. Your role is to be able to motivate training participants through our own enthusiasm and commitment to ministry and to the Harmony of the Gospels.

Interpersonal communication: Though more important among some cultures than others, strong interpersonal skills are absolutely necessary for effective intercultural education.

Lifelong learner: Openness to learning from the experiences of those we train is vital for our effectiveness. This has to be more than token interest. We must be interested in the backgrounds and experiences of the learners and we need to be willing to learn along with them.

Empathy: We must acquire a sense of how the students are feeling about the training given their own cultural orientations and backgrounds. Empathy is not only a quality we need to use in relationship to students but also a quality we should seek to transmit to them personally.

Sense of humor: Anyone who has had much experience in a cross-cultural setting will attest to the value of a sense of humor in coping with the stresses and pressures of intercultural contexts. Learners who can laugh at themselves and see the humor amidst frustrating circumstances will have an easier time adjusting to the cultural challenges. We can use tactful, well-timed humor to break the tension of inter cultural education.

Ethical Behavior
Even the secular arena of adult education would say that the hallmark of competent intercultural trainers is that they hold very high standards for themselves. Some of the personal standards lauded in the field include lifelong learning, personal professional development, an awareness of learners and their needs, sharing knowledge and skills with others, establishing supportive learning environments. Of course we would add the essential need for integrity and aligning our lives with Christ. The struggle to win the battle of truly advancing the Kingdom of God in our own hearts is a cross-cultural battle and the extent to which we are passionate about fighting that battle will come through, despite all the cultural interference.

More to learn!

Despite the highly theoretical nature of this paper, it is my prayer that it will increase our effectiveness as we seek to make disciples of all nations! May we become "experts" at equipping the church all around the globe to make disciples.

This is only a starting point in thinking about contextualizing as we further globalize our endeavors to develop Great Commission Churches. I am committed to exploring this much more extensively. I am interested in using my research for my graduate work to think much more about what happens in the cross-cultural training setting and how to best prepare for that. How do we contextualize without sacrificing content? Is there a plan for contextualization that we can apply to most cultures? I hope to learn a great deal from all of you and our collective experiences as I continue to make meaning out of our intercultural contexts. Thank you for plodding through this with me.

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