Intercultural learning through education abroad: Theories, processes and practices

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Webinar: Institute for Cross-Cultural Teaching and Learning
21 January, 2016
A century of intercultural learning abroad

• What is the nature of learning across cultures?

• What is the process by which humans learn across cultures?

• How can humans be taught or trained to do this?


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Three dominant narratives—our community’s “stories”—about learning across cultures

1. Humans become more *cultured* by learning superior ideas and emulating cultivated behavior.

2. Humans become more *culturally sensitive* through talking about and being immersed in cultural difference.

3. Humans *develop interculturally* through focusing on their own and others’ ways of making meaning, and by learning to respond effectively and appropriately to culturally different others.

Story 1: Positivism
“Learning from the outside in”

“... a real external world whose properties are definite and independent of the observer who perceives them. ... things are what they seem, as perceived through our senses.”

(S. Hawking & L. Mladinow, 2012)
Story 1: Students encounter sophisticated, “civilized” people & places

- With the Grand Tour—this story’s signature program—learning occurs, in privileged places, through exposure to the new & different, and through modeling and imitation.
Students learn as we teach and expose them to an unfamiliar and privileged culture “out there”

- Students learn through exposure to the new and different in privileged places.

- Students learn when educators describe, talk about, culture-specific differences.
Story 1: Theories
We come to know through the scientific method
Story 1 theories:
The world is organized hierarchically
Story 1: Theories:
Behaviorism describes how we learn

Diagram:
- Stimulus: Provided by instructor
- Response: By learner
- Reinforcement: Provided by instructor

Learning is behavior change.

Illustration: Rat holding a sign saying, "Will press lever for food."
Story 1: The process of learning abroad, described

1. Acquire knowledge about privileged place and people

2. Directly experience the place

3. Emulate the behavior of cultivated people there

4. Return home more “cultured”: more knowledgeable and worldly
Story 1 theory (now discredited)
Social Darwinism

• “Survival of the fittest”
Doubts about story 1:
Accelerating erosion of faith in hierarchy
Story 2: Relativism

“Learning from the outside in”—with a difference
“The things we have in common far outnumber and outweigh those that divide us.” Walt Disney
Story 2 Theory: “Immersion”
Story 2 Theory: 
Culture Shock*

*U-curve: Oberg, 1955; W-curve: Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963
Story 2: Theory

“Contrast-culture” training approach

“Differences that make a difference”:

• Non-verbal (eye contact, personal space, touching)
• Communication styles (direct/indirect)
• Learning styles (concrete experience/abstract conceptual)
• Cognitive styles (linear logic/spiraling logic)
• Value contrasts (individualism/collectivism)
Story 2: The learning abroad process, described

1. Learn about, become aware of, cultural differences (contrast-culture learning)

2. Immerse yourself in the experience abroad

3. Return home more culturally sensitive

Open question: Does becoming more culturally sensitive allow us to cross cultural boundaries?

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Georgetown Study findings*: Do traditional “immersion” practices foster intercultural learning?

• Take steps to improve language proficiency: Little impact
• Maximize contact with host nationals: No impact
• Enrollment in host school classes: No impact
• Carry out internships, service learning: No impact
• Be housed in home stays: No impact
• Send away for longer periods: Yes—some impact
• Pre departure cultural orientation: Yes—some impact
• Home stays: Yes—when students engaged with host family
• Cultural mentoring at sites abroad: Yes—by far the highest impact practice in the study


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Story 3: Constructivism
Learning “from the inside out”: Acting on our awareness of our own and others’ sense-making
Story 3: Reflection and self awareness

“We don’t see things as they are, we see things as we are.”
Anais Nin
A paradigm shift “is a reconstruction of the field from new fundamentals that changes some of the field’s most elementary theoretical generalizations, as well as many of its methods and applications. . . . When the transition is complete, the profession will have changed its view of the field, its methods, and its goals.”

* Thomas Kuhn
Story 3: Theory
Social construction of reality*

* Berger & Luckmann: We and the other members of our cultural groups construct the world we perceive and live in.
Story 3 theory to practice: Transformative learning process

I. Self-Awareness

II. Awareness of Others

III. Manage My Emotions & Thoughts

IV. Cultural Bridging

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Story 3 Theory to Practice
Four-step transformative learning process

Step 1: Increasing awareness of our own characteristic ways of making meaning in familiar and unfamiliar cultural contexts

Step 2: Increasing awareness of others’ ways of making meaning in familiar and unfamiliar cultural contexts

Step 3: Managing our emotions and thoughts in the face of ambiguity, change, and challenging circumstances and people

Step 4: Bridging cultural gaps between ourselves and others—shifting our perspective, attuning our emotions and adapting our behavior in effective and appropriate ways

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Practicing the first step in the four-step process

Step 1: Increasing awareness of our own characteristic ways of making meaning in familiar and unfamiliar cultural contexts

Practices:
- Awareness of the Autobiographical “I”
- Awareness of the Mindful “Me”
- Develop my personal vision statement
- Identify my characteristic ways of responding to cultural difference, ambiguity and uncertainty
- Identify my assumptions about intercultural learning and teaching
- Identify cultural contexts where my values and behavior play out in different ways

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Story 3 Theory to Practice: The Intercultural Development Continuum (IDC)

- Denial
- Polarization
- Minimization
- Acceptance
- Adaptation
- Intercultural Mindset

Deeply Comprehends Difference
Bridges across Difference

De-emphasizes Difference

Judges Difference

Misses Difference

Monocultural Mindset

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Modified from the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), M. Bennett, 1986
Story 3: Theory to Practice
Experiential Learning Theory*

* David Kolb
Story 3: Theory to Practice

4-step critical incident debriefing process*

A. Concrete Experience
   1. Subjectively describe your feelings, perceptions & thoughts that occurred during (not after) the experience. What did others involved in the incident seem to be feeling?
   2. Objectively describe the experience (who, what, when, where, how)

B. Reflective Observation
   1. Looking back at the experience, what were the perspectives of the key actors who were involved (including of course yourself)?
   2. Why did the people involved (including you) behave as you did?

C. Abstract Conceptualization
   1. Relate concepts or theories we’ve learned about to the experience; explain as thoroughly as you can how they related to the experience.

D. Active Experimentation
   1. You’re analyzed the experience; what have you learned from it?
   2. What have you learned about yourself?
   3. What action steps can you take to act more effectively and appropriately in the future?

*Joyce Osland, David Kolb, et al (eds.) Organizational behavior (8th ed.); slightly edited by M. Vande Berg
Story 3 Theory to Application: The Transition Planning Cycle*

Story 3 theory to practice: 4-step mindfulness process

Jon Kabat-Zinn, M.D. “Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: On purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (1994)
Intercultural teaching and learning resources

• Summer Institute for Intercultural Communication (SIIC, July)
• Winter Institute for Intercultural Communication (WIIC, March)

• Personal Leadership
• Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)


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