**Comparative and International Education Society**

**Annual Conference 2023**

**Individual Submission**

**Proposal**

**Dissonant Edges:**

**Exploring how adult development theory informs intercultural competency development**

How can education best enable an awareness of inter-being, togetherness, compassion, understanding, and a cooperative future in combating social, economic, and political injustice? Or posed a different way, how can education build intercultural competency and shared understanding rather than generate division? This theoretical research study builds upon previous work in intercultural competency by exploring the role of dissonant events and subsequent reflection as a potential catalyst for deepened self-awareness, adaptation to other cultures, and appreciative understanding as particularly observed in immersion programs (Allan, 2003; Cushner, 2011; Mitchell & Paras, 2018). While commonly associated with transformative theory (Mezirow, 2000), this study looks at adult development theory as an additional lens through which to understand the meaning and significance of dissonant events. Specifically, in adult development theory, Berger (2012) describes growth edges, a sense of dissonance or uncomfortable transition experienced in the movement through adult development stages. Outcomes of this movement are a growing self-awareness, capacity to take different perspectives, and the ability to “continuously transform her own system” (Berger, 2012, p. 19). This study examines the relationship between growth edges and dissonant events – collectively here called dissonant edges – that may catalyze transformed meaning-making through reflective self-awareness, the foundation of intercultural competency.

In a seminal study among university officials, Deardorff (2006) identified three core components of intercultural competency: attitudes, such as respect, openness, curiosity, and discovery; knowledge, including self-awareness, cultural, and historical knowledge; and skills, such as listening, observing, evaluating, analyzing, and interpreting. Similarly, Major, Munday, and Winslade (2020) describe intercultural competency as a “process of ongoing learning through critical reflection to develop knowledge, attitudes, skills, and behaviors that enhance our ability to negotiate successful intercultural relationships” (p. 162). Elsewhere, Cushner (2011) defines intercultural competency as the “capacity and ability to enable people to be successful with a wide range of culturally diverse contexts” (p. 206). Still others like Paras, Carignan, Brenner, Hardy, Malmgren and Rathburn (2019) use Vande Berg’s development framework to define intercultural competency as a process of “cultivating cultural self-awareness, development awareness of others, managing emotions, and bridging cultural gaps” (p. 24).

Indeed, the development of intercultural competency is a continual process involving multiple intercultural experiences leading to an evolving transformation in worldview structure and perspective (Deardorff, 2006; Hammer, Bennett & Wiseman, 2003; Parkhouse, Tichnor-Wagner, Cain & Glazier, 2016). What is not well answered is the process of *how* to develop intercultural competency (Mitchell & Paras, 2018). Brendel, Aksit, Aksit and Schrufer (2016), Cushner (2009), and Santoro (2014) reiterate the importance of direct personal engagement with another people and context, that is, another culture, to build intercultural competency. An oft-cited vehicle to develop intercultural competency is the use of international immersion programs, which can fast track the development of intercultural competency if such a program is intentionally designed, implemented explicitly to meet that objective, and incorporates active reflection (Che, Spearman, & Manizade, 2009; Cushner, 2012; DeJaeghere & Cao, 2009). Immersion programs offer a unique forum to shift paradigms, ways of thinking, perceptions of normal, and sense-making that can have significant effect on participants’ competency and capacity to engage effectively with other cultures (Dunn, Dotson, Cross, Kesner, & Lundahl, 2014; Ritz, 2011; Sharma, Phillion & Malewski, 2011). Bennet (1993), Byram (1997), Deardorff (2006) and Hammer, Bennett, and Wiseman (2003) note that immersion programs can move participants to a new way of being and knowing – that is, a transformed ontology that facilitates the recognition and value of other epistemologies, and subsequently accepting, adapting, and integrating knowledge, skills, and attitudes of intercultural competencies.

At the same time, the immersion program is a learning experience; this experiential learning engagement can be observed and understood through Mezirow’s transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000), which includes concepts of critical reflection, the centrality of experience, and rational discourse (Baumgartner, 2012). The act of reflective self-inquiry is instigated by a disorientating dilemma, or an incident of “dissonance,” which may subsequently lead to transformation of perspective or identity (Trilokekar and Kukar, 2011, p. 1142). Because an immersion program is more than knowledge acquisition, immersion programs can offer a transformational experience of identity (consisting of cognitive, emotional, spiritual, and somatic selves) that can create paradigm shifts in participants (Grant, Green, Rynsaardt, 2010).

Said another way, the core of intercultural competency is posited as making sense of the world and experiencing the transformation when sense making shifts, a theoretical construct Kegan (1994) calls constructive-development. Jennifer Garvey Berger (2012) refers to the developing way of understanding the world as “self-complexity,” also called “forms of mind,” which is the shifting or transforming capacity of humans “to cope with complexity, multiple perspectives, and abstraction” (p. 10). These forms of mind shift along growth edges, which is when new perspective-taking emerges as adults move through development stages of self-sovereignty, socialized, self-authored, and finally self-transforming forms of mind (Berger, 2012). Integrated within this evolving sense-making are the attitudes and awareness that allow this sense making to effectively, meaningfully, and productively to occur, with curiosity as the “lubricant of the learning process” (Berger, 2012, p. 164). Notably, the development of reflection, self-awareness, and perspective-taking are integrally tied to these development phases. Said another way, adult development theory is learning the skills, knowledge, and attitudes to gain new perspectives, self-awareness, and the traits of curiosity, humility, empathy, and compassion – the necessary elements and foundation of intercultural competency.

As adults move through various stages of sense-making and perspective taking, spawned by crossing through growth edges, how might this process inform the movement through dissonant events? How might an individual’s development stage intersect, or not, with the acquisition and development of intercultural competency?The outcome of this study may contribute to our collective understanding of how intercultural competency is developed, strengthened, and expanded – and may help answer the question of how we can sustainably and effectively counter breakdowns in our human relationships and the injustices plaguing our societies.

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