**A Brief Introduction to Intercultural Competency**

Although the world is twenty-four (24) years into the 21st century CE, there are many persons who have access to the interconnectivity needed to establish global intraconnections, but either have not been afforded the opportunity, or have not sought the opportunity to engage in the globalization process.

The 19th century industrial revolution is quickly becoming moribund. Globalization is the present step upon which humankind stands in its quest for advancement. This premise is no surprise to many 21st century students many of whom were born into and began their formal education in a globally-focused world. Authors Thomas Friedman, and Patricia Aburdene discuss this in their books respectively entitled *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the 21stCcentury*, and *Megatrends 2010: The Rise of Conscious Capitalism.*  Friedman describes “the flat world in which people from all walks of life, almost regardless of their location, can engage in meaningful ways with one another”, while Patricia Aburdene introduces and expounds upon the theory that in 2005, “our society was reaching a new phase in which the ideas of social responsibility, environmental values, and a spiritual dimension were beginning to reshape capitalism in interesting ways.” The authors observed that while “we cannot take these predictions as absolute fact, it is worth thinking about our changing circumstances and the impact these changes are having on many areas of our lives”. They then list the important areas of change that are occurring, including the way we learn. **1.**

That these statements have clearly manifested into reality can be experienced in the current complexities that are clearly evident in a 21st century education. It is a now a norm for a motivated learner to take a course that includes livestream presentation lectures and coursework in a global classroom that is inclusive of students attending from Mongolia, German, Brazil, and the United States simultaneously. This is the flat world of which Thomas Friedan writes and these are the students who inhabit it almost effortlessly.

Aburdene planted the interesting seed of an idea that a 21st century society no longer experiences capitalism through the rear-view mirror of the industrial revolution, but through the expansive and advancing view of globalization in many intraconnected areas of our lives, including that of education.

Willard Daggett, author of *Successful Schools: From Research to Action Plans* writes that within the basic human social institutions of economics, politics, religion, family, and the educational system, there are four areas of changes that are moving beyond their established structure. They are globalization, demographics, technology, and changing values and attitudes among the generations. Embedded within each of these areas are both the opportunities for greater intercultural knowledge and understanding, and the rationale for attempting to comprehend them. **2.**

Many of these changes are primarily attributed to the advancements in computer science, its associated technologies, and digital media. However, as each of the writers above has alluded, it takes a multiplicity of areas to correctly interconnect in order to bring about globalization and intraconnection on a global scale. In order to achieve this, it is important to develop an understanding of the processes involved. An understanding of these processes may also assist in identifying and understanding the differences as they are perceived by persons whose world views are primarily visualized via a 19th century, industrial revolution focused, rear-view mirror.

The system of education in the United States has aimed towards unity from its inception. In its beginnings the United States as a land of immigrants attempted to create a Common School type unity from its pool of white, Anglo, Protestant students. However, the tent was quite small. The attempts to achieve unity in education came at the expense of learners who were Native American, who were from enslaved peoples, who were Irish Catholic, who were Latino, or who were considered to be “the other”. They were either systematically excluded, or were included only as far as the periphery and even then, were often met with disdain and sometimes overt hostility and violence. That any unity at all was achieved was accomplished with varying degrees of success depending upon the motivations of the local educators, the tax-paying local communities, the respective state legislatures, and the race and /or gender of the students. Today in the 21st century, educators are attempting to achieve unity through pluralism based on a two-prong system of multicultural education and global education.

The movement towards multicultural education and global education invites the entire educational system from learners, to parents, educators, administrators, bus-drivers, food-workers, school uniform designers, counseling professionals, etc.… into a global sized tent that is welcoming, diverse, and pluralistic.

Although, seemingly similar, there are major differences between the systems of multicultural education and global education. Multicultural education “directs its attention towards issues of equity among domestic population, while global education looks to the world and asks how education can make the whole world better”. **3.**

“Multicultural education is a progressive approach for transforming education based on educational equality and social justice. The components required in a multicultural education are content integrations, prejudice reduction, empowering school culture and social culture. **4.**

Global education interconnects world cultures, economics, politics, technologies, and local ecologies in an active participatory, interdisciplinary approach that addresses and solves problems through inclusiveness, tolerance, justice, cooperation, interconnectedness, and nonviolence.  **5.**

The common denominator of both systems of teaching is Intercultural Competency. Intercultural competency refers to an acquired repertoire of culturally appropriate behaviors that are suitable for the right time, place, and circumstances of the current event(s) and interactions. Its components contain a potential skill set that at a minimum requires the ability to resist stereotypes, the abilities to anticipate complexity and respond flexibly and appropriately, the ability to appropriately modify one’s behavior to the presenting circumstances, the ability to express an open-mind coupled with a generosity of expectations, and the ability to demonstrate a genuine interest in cultures that are considered different from one’s own.

**Stages of Intercultural Competency**

In order to manifest this skillset, a person with intercultural competency must be able translate her/his knowledge of cultural differences and similarities into positive action. Such persons will have learned to listen actively and empathetically, to have developed enough life experience to perceive the person(s) with whom they are interacting accurately, to have achieved and maintained an approach that is non-judgmental, to have researched, gathered , understood, and comprehended accurate and appropriate information about cultures that are dissimilar from one’s culture of upbringing, to have developed the ability to swiftly shift one’s frame of reference as required by the presenting circumstances, and to have the ability to take appropriate risks in order to employ a good outcome in what may be accurately perceived as circumstances that have manifested in ways that are unfamiliar.

Acquiring the experience to achieve these skills requires meeting and passing through three defined stages. The first stage is named Unconscious Incompetence. In this stage, the person is not even aware that s/he lacks awareness. This is a stage of naivete. In this stage persons may both easily and innocently insult other cultures and can also be taken advantage of by unscrupulous characters.

Conscious Competence is the second stage. During this stage one becomes aware of the lack of awareness and actively attempts to address the situation by acquiring the proper skills needed to recognize situations. They are in the common vernacular bringing themselves “up to speed”. The third and final stage is that of Unconscious Competence. In this stage a person’s conscious thoughts about the hard-fought acquired skills and how to act upon them have been assimilated and are no longer in the person’s consciousness. **8.** What seems to be intuitive reactions are really the culmination of absorbing the lessons learned during the stage of Conscious Competence. “Intercultural competence comes about after recognizing where one is on the continuum, engaging in gradual, systematic, oftentimes repetitious, and well-planned exposure to intercultural interactions that nudge one toward increasingly complex levels of interactions that provide both support and challenge. In so doing the person gradually adjusts to the changing circumstances and learns to function more effectively in the new environment. ”To enter in the changing circumstances too rapidly may lead to the unwelcome phenomenon appropriately named “culture shock”**. 6., 7.**

Deardorff’s Pyramid Model identifies the Motivational Attitudes that persons need to acquire knowledge, comprehension, and skills. Motivational attitudes are a respectful valuing of different cultures, an openness to all persons while withholding judgment of them and their cultures, and remaining curious and positive while tolerating ambiguity and uncertainty. Once these motivational attitudes are activated the person progresses to acquiring Knowledge and Comprehension by becoming culturally self-aware, studying to acquire a deep understanding of a culture, studying cultural-specific information, and becoming socio-linguistically aware. This is done by employing the skills of active listening, interpreting, analyzing, evaluating, and having the ability to relate. When the above is thoroughly and successfully completed the person will have become adaptable to different communication styles and behaviors while comprehending phenomena in cultural contexts. S/he will be increasingly flexible both cognitively and behaviorally, and will be empathetic with ethnorelative views. In the final outcome, the person behaves and communicates effectively and appropriately based upon her/his incorporation of the intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes that have been acquired. **Ibid**

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) is a model of intercultural sensitivity that demonstrates an understanding of intercultural development; Its starting point begins with Ethnocentrism into which is embedded denial, defense, and minimization, and the endpoint is Ethnorelativism which is the synergy of acceptance, adaptation, and integration.

**DMIS - Ethnocentric Stages**

The ethnocentric stage begins with a person’s Denial/inability to see cultural differences. Such persons often engage in stereotyping “the other” by expressing superficial platitudes of tolerance while tending to dehumanize persons by believing that they do not have normal feelings and reactions, and by seeing “the other” as subversions or inferior versions of themselves. This may lead to a superficial overemphasis of the familiar while not admitting to differences thus reducing “the other” to a characterless, non-complex entity which may be easily overlooked or ignored. It may also lead to discrimination, exploitation, attempts at conquest, pogroms, sectarian violence, and the rise in hate groups throughout the world. To move to the next stage the person must work to discover commonalities among peoples while becoming more open to the complexities in their own cognitive processing as they gradually develop category-discrimination skills.

The next stage in Ethnocentrism is Defense. There are typically three areas of defense. They are denigration/derogation which is the act of belittling or actively discriminating against another person, superiority in which the person believes that “others” are beneath her/him, and reversal which refers to a person who evaluates his/her culture as inferior to another. Persons in reversal acquire and assimilate the prejudices of “the other” group. In the defense stage persons may form or join mobs and gangs ostensibly to protect their socio-cultural position. To move past the defense stage requires a thoughtful, affective, support that stresses the commonalities of humankind while pointing out that all humans have different ways of approaching common concerns. This might be more easily accomplished by utilizing Cushner, K. (2014) *Strategies for Enhancing Intercultural Competence across the Teacher Education Curriculum* as a teaching and training module.

The final stage of the Ethnocentrism is Minimization. Here, persons have begun to recognize and accept superficial cultural differences in customs such as the handling of monies, and eating commonly recognized foods while simultaneously believing that everyone is essentially “like me” and they therefore share “my” reality. Over time and with mindful awareness there is a growing recognition that there are differences. There is an important developmental task to be achieved here, which is to become culturally aware of the context from within which values and behaviors are understood. According to Bennet, the concept of context does not exist in the ethnocentric phase of the DMIS. When the vital concept of context is finally comprehended and assimilated by the person its employment advances the person from the ethnocentric phase of the continuum into the ethnorelative stages. **8., 9.**

**DMIS - Ethnorelative Stages**

The first stage in the ethnorelative side of the DMIS continuum is Acceptance. The person begins to interpret encounters and analyze complex interactions from within a cultural context structure while analyzing interactions in culture-contrast terms. While categories of difference are expanded, the understanding that humankind is composed of a myriad of complex and acceptable cultural contexts is also expanded.

Adaptation is the next stage on the ethnorelative side of the continuum in the DMIS. In this stage persons comprehend a need for conscious intention and action beyond the acceptance stage. They actively work to develop the ability to view and experience cultural categories as more flexible. They become increasingly empathetic, comfortable, understanding, and competent as they communicate across cultures and are themselves better understood across cultural boundaries. This adaptation exists in two forms. “Cultural adaptation is the ability to consciously shift perspective into alternative cultural worldview elements and employ multiple cultural frames of reference in evaluating phenomena. Behavioral adaptation refers to the internalization of more than one complete worldview, enabling people to shift into different frames without much conscious effort and then act in culturally appropriate ways. These persons are becoming bicultural or intercultural.”

The final stage on the ethnorelative side of the continuum in the DMIS is Integration. In this stage the person has internalized the bicultural or multicultural frames of reference and are able to mediate among multiple groups. They are progressively becoming bridges that facilitate positive, constructive contacts among cultures. It is a rare achievement to reach the Integration stage. **10.**

**Understanding the Socio-Cultural Learning Process**

All people, regardless of the culture in which they were raised share certain common social experiences. These common social experiences inform a peoples’ communal definition of, and assignment of a hierarchal value to its common components. The common components are communication, status, family, government, history, temporality, art, and explanations of their relationship to nature. This complex human created construct is determined by many elements such as geography, ethnicity, language, religion, and history. It informs people that they are different from those who do not belong to their group. Those who belong to their group are taught guidelines that ensure the continuation of the dominant culture.

These guidelines are both objective and subjective. The objective guidelines consist of the visible, tangible, easily observed elements of a group such as its physical artifacts, the institutions that it creates, the languages that it speaks, the clothing that it wears, the food that it eats, and the ritual objects that it creates. These are what makes the culture readily identifiable to people both within it, and people who are not of the group. The subjective guidelines are more subtle. They are the people’s attitudes, values, norms, hierarchical social roles, and educational parameters that inform their group and provide the meaning for the objective components at the unconscious level. As such they are the invisible, less tangible aspects of culture. Misunderstandings and miscues at the subjective level often leads to intercultural problems between peoples. **11.**

A people’s learning style is driven by its socialization process within which are contained its subjective guidelines. Socialization is the process by which people learn the norms that are expected of them by a particular group. The socialization process generally occurs in three life-stages. The primary socialization stage occurs during the socialization of infants and young children by families and early-age caregivers. The secondary socialization stage often incorporates the teaching of older children by the local day-to-day events occurring in their neighborhood, their family’s religious affiliation, their peers, the school system, and the social and digital media which may be embedded in the child’s surroundings. The adult socialization stage socializes adults into roles, settings, and situations for which they may or may not have been adequately prepared during the primary and secondary socialization stages.

“Persons acquire a cultural identity within the larger society through their experiences within a variety of daily socializing agents.” Students in school are socialized for conformity to “normality” by the educational system. Educators should be aware that there are other socialization influencers over which they have little to no control. These are the student’s overall dominant culture, the influence of parents and families, the school principal, and perhaps the textbooks that are purchased by the school. **12, 13.**

It is important that educators understand that teaching and learning styles universally vary among cultures no matter the age of the student from nursery school through andragogy. Educators in multi-cultural classrooms will be the most supportive of their students when they themselves are educated to be aware of the signs of cultural learning style differences. Once they understand learning style differences, educators can mindfully develop lesson plans and instructional approaches that may be adapted to students in culturally specific ways. In order to do this, they “need to know that cultural universals such as learning style differences, patterns of communication, and value orientation are part of every multicultural classroom. They then need to gather the particulars of the identified variations through close observation, inquiry, and study so that they can plan and deliver instruction that is appropriate for all of their students.” As such teachers who have embedded cultural competency into their methodology may view the first day of school as follows in this brief 7 minute 59 second TED talk. <https://youtu.be/27-Q4x9yE0c> **14.**

The caveat is that students are not passive recipients of teaching. Once the teaching is received by the student it is interpreted and acted upon according to the personality of the student and his/her primary, secondary, and adult socialization experiences. The educator must expect that learning may be filtered differently through each of the components of socialization as briefly introduced above.

In answer to this, *similarities or generalizations* can be made by educators about groups of people with the understanding that there will always be persons who do not neatly fit into generalizations. “Generalizations refer to the tendency of a majority of people in a cultural group to hold certain values and beliefs and to engage in certain patterns of behavior. This information can be supported by research and can be applied to a large percentage of a population or groups. A generalization is distinct from a stereotype. Stereotypes refer to the application of a specific piece of information which may be a generalization of an inaccurate piece of information that one applies to every person in that group. This leads to unsupported information that blurs specific knowledge about individuals.” **15.**

**Cultural-Social Responses to Intercultural Competency**

Intercultural competency is being actively countered by members of society who promulgate an assimilationist ideology in opposition to social change. Both local communities and the national countries in which they are situated have “deep structures”. Deep Structures are values and assumptions that are widely expected and shared by its members. Deep structures do not change easily or readily. This leads many in the respective nations to believe that the values and assumptions associated with the deep structures are embedded in stone. In some societies for example, “no school can become too different from its home school system unless the system as a whole, changes.” **16.**

These opinions are based both in local and national deep structures for many reasons. First, many local educators and policy makers have not been afforded the opportunities to examine the systems for themselves. In fact, the years of hard work, and the well-deserved achievements earned by the educators as they completed their own teaching education may have come at the cost of the being unable to experience the world widely. Second, members of local communities have a familiarity with what they once studied and they sometimes have little inclination to change from the known, comfortable, and traditional. Third, the known, comfortable and traditional systems are more often than not assessed based on the classic subject matter knowledge versus interdisciplinary thought and approaches. Fourth, there is a deep distrust among local and national populations of “the other”, inclusive of “their” customs, values, and priorities. Last, but not least there is an identifiable world-wide shift towards increasingly conservative thoughts and actions that tend to preclude inclusive, interdisciplinary, liberal actions. The distrust manifests in many ways including the defunding of educational programs, banning school library books, and even forcing school districts to change accreditors. **17., 18., 19.**

On the other hand, there are just as many forces that are propelling the systems of multicultural education and global education forward towards the mid-21st century. The world is increasingly digitally connected and networked. Students eagerly and actively attend seminars, complete whole courses, and earn degrees internationally, both face-to-face and via LMS platforms (Learning Management Systems). In so doing, the students are introduced and become immersed in the concept of “internationalization”. Internationalization includes articulated institutional commitment, administrative leadership, structure and staffing, a globally focus curriculum, co-curriculums and learning objectives, support for faculty to achieve international and intercultural competence, the opportunity for student mobility, and successful international collaboration and partnerships.” **20.**

As stated earlier, “Multicultural education is a progressive approach for transforming education based on educational equality and social justice. The components required in educating a multicultural education are content integrations, prejudice reduction, empowering school culture and social culture.” Thus, it is incumbent upon the educator to understand that cultural learning patterns vary both between and within cultural groups. S/he does considerable disservice to the students and the educational process as whole if teaching is approached from an ethnocentric point of view. If the educator will instead embrace the attribute of being actively mindful of the multicultural diversity in her/his classroom and teach and provide resources that positively support students in both interculturally universal and culturally specific contexts, the students will be better placed for realizing their academic success.

**Manifesting Theory into an Educational Reality: Resources That Connect Teaching with Learning.**

The authors of *Human Diversity in Education* have shortlisted the learning goals for Intercultural Competency as follows below. This writer has in addition structured the author’s learning goals within the evidence-based levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy/ Bloom’s Revised Taxonomy.(BT) **21.**

* Recognize Social and Cultural Change: (BT-Knowledge)
* Understand Culture, Learning, and the Culture Learning Process

(BT-Understand)

* Improve Inter and Intra Group Interactions (BT-Synthesis)
* Transmit [Transfer] Intercultural Understanding and Skills (BT- Apply)**, 22., 23.**

There are a myriad of excellent certificate and degree programs that specialize in the subject of Multicultural Education. An educator may wish to explore The National Association of Multicultural Education (NAME) as a starting point. NAME offers resources that “conceptualize multicultural learning in the classroom in relationship to the interplay between students and teachers, and among students themselves. This interplay views multicultural learning in relationship to what teachers can do that impact on student outcomes. They share case studies and reflective activities that focus on the four (4) dimensions of the classroom in which those interplays occur: curriculum, assessment of learning, pedagogy/andragogy, and intellectual challenge with a specific focus on interactions between students and teachers, and among students across and within the four dimensions with the main question for teachers being: What can I do in my own classroom and school?” **24.**

There are also recognized mechanisms by which an educator may either self-assess or be assessed for cultural competency. One such assessment is the Multicultural Teaching Competency Scale (MTCS). **25.**

The Multicultural Teaching Competency Scale was developed and validated by Spanierman, Lisa, et al. Its results were eventually confirmed and it is now employed in various educational settings. The MTCS “captures three dimensions of multicultural teaching competency: (a) awareness, (b) knowledge, and (c) skills. Multicultural teaching awareness is defined as three dynamic and continuous processes reflecting teachers’ awareness of (a) self and others as cultural beings, (b) their attitudes and biases, and (c) the need to create culturally sensitive learning environments for all students.” “Multicultural teaching knowledge captures teachers’ knowledge of culturally responsive pedagogy and instructional strategies related to diverse populations, major sociohistorical and current sociopolitical realities, and cultural dynamics (e.g., ethnic identity, gender socialization, etc.) that may affect between- and within-group differences. Multicultural teaching skills are defined as a teachers’ ability to (a) actively select, develop, implement, and evaluate strategies that facilitate the academic achievement and personal development of all students; (b) select and implement culturally sensitive behavioral management strategies and interventions; and (c) participate in ongoing review and evaluation of school policies, procedures, and practices with regard to cultural responsiveness.” It is clear that in addition to theory there is professionally recognized and validated praxis embedded in Intercultural Competency. **26.**

**Conclusion**

This paper has served as a brief introduction to the importance of the preparation needed to practice intercultural competency in the classroom. In the United States, educators and students no longer live in a 19th century Industrial Revolution focused world. The outlook for the 21st century is global and digitally networked, thus students may enter classrooms from any place there is digital connection, and educators may in turn may be assigned to teach students living any country in the world. Moreover, during this time of mass immigration and depending upon her/his subject matter expertise, the educator may be assigned to teach both in a face-to-face brick and mortar classroom, and digitally via a Learning Management System to students from distinct cultures.

Twenty-first century educators must be prepared to share the knowledge of their subject (s) matter in a manner that is professional, interculturally competent, and understanding of concepts ranging from pedagogy to andragogy. In so doing they must be aware of their strengths and their needs for improvement. This requires the abilities to address and be vigilant about the self-work required to be mindful of their conscious biases while remaining cognizant of their unconscious biases and being familiar with how they manifest.

In order to become interculturally competent, educators may have to search out, acquire, and assimilate life-experiences that may not be readily available. It may mean that educators must buck the norms of the society into which they were born and/or raised, and/or currently practice. Like all things worthwhile the theory of Intercultural Competency can be listed and memorized, however, reaching the point where the educator has culturally and behaviorally adapted to it takes longer, and to reach the point where it is integrated may take many years to achieve, or may never occur.

While this sound daunting, educators should know that there are many certificate and degree programs that teach the components of multicultural education. Moreover, there are associations that provide strong, solid support to educators who choose to embark on this path. The educator must also be aware however, that there are some parents, officials, and even entire societies who strongly disagree with the concept of intercultural competency.

In the end the interactions modeled and taught by 21st century educators who are professionally trained in intercultural competency may positively affect their students, the families of the students, neighborhoods, communities, and as we move towards the mid-21st century, perhaps even entire nations on a global scale.

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