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An Essay about Intercultural Sensitivity and Competence in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Intercultural sensitivity is one of the more influential fields of intercultural communication, engagement, equity, and inclusion. It describes the standard ways in which people experience, interpret, and interact across cultural differences. Intercultural sensitivity starts with the awareness that there are genuine differences between cultures and that these variations are commonly mirrored in the approaches by which people communicate and relate to one another. By recognizing how one experiences cultural predictions about one's effectiveness of intercultural communication can be made. Educational interventions can be tailored to facilitate intercultural sensitivity development. Generally, this development signifies a move from an ethnocentric view to an ethnorelative view. Researchers have undertaken several approaches, not only to understand ethnocentrism but also to attempt to reduce it in Higher Education Institutions. In this essay, we first discuss the concepts of intercultural sensitivity and intercultural competence and how these are connected. Then, we present several studies focused on internationalisation practices to develop students' intercultural sensitivity and/or competence, finalising with an alternative pedagogical approach to intercultural sensitivity development -The Creative Action Methodology (CAM).

Keywords: creative action methodology, essay, higher education, intercultural competence, intercultural sensitivity.

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I. Introduction-Culture, Intercultural Sensitivity, Competence, and Learning: Definitions and Relationships

Intercultural sensitivity can be defined as "the ability to discriminate and experience relevant cultural differences" (Hammer *et al*., 2003, p. 422). The term 'to discriminate' refers to the ability 'to distinguish' cultural differences (Bennett, 1993). Relevant cultural differences mainly refer to differences informed by cultural values and behaviors (Bennet, 2012; Hammer *et al*., 2003). Intercultural competence can be defined as: "effective and appropriate behavior and communication in intercultural situations" (Deardorff, 2009a, p. 479). Altshuler *et al*. (2003) and Deardorff (2009a) argued that increased intercultural sensitivity contributes to one's potential to demonstrate intercultural competence. Hammer *et al*. (2003) supported this argument stating that if a person has only been exposed to their own culture, then it will be difficult, if not impossible, to experience any differences between one's perceptions and the perceptions of those who have a different cultural background.

Intercultural competence has gained increased attention in Higher Education across the world, and it is considered a 21st-century skill that anyone needs to function as a professional and citizen in a globalizing world (Knight, 2008; Trilling & Fadel, 2009). Ministries of Education across the world, for instance in Australia, Malaysia, South Korea, Sweden, and the Netherlands, have stressed the importance of students' intercultural competence development in their respective visions of Higher Education (HE). The internationalization of Higher Education places the focus on students' intercultural competence. An often-cited definition of the internationalization of HE is: "the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of higher education at the institutional and national levels" (Knight, 2008, p. 21). Internationalization practices in HE can be distinguished into two categories: "internationalization abroad" and "internationalization at home" (Knight, 2008, p. 22). Internationalization abroad consists of educational components for students and staff that take place beyond the national border such as exchange programs and internationalization at home consists of educational components such as intercultural competence development at HEIs' home campuses (Knight, 2008).

A key element of globalization that has influenced the internationalization process of HE is the emphasis on the "knowledge society" (Knight, 2008, p. 6). To support a knowledge society the development of certain knowledge and skills is needed to be ready for the professional field (Knight, 2008). The focus should be on establishing structures and cultures that enhance quality, set direction, develop people and (re) design the organization through a

mindset of transformative learning and transformational leadership (Neves *et al*., 2023).

As the marketplace is globalizing, intercultural competence is needed to function in the professional field and employers require employees to cooperate with people from other cultural backgrounds (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). In part, this serves organizations to successfully acquire and retain customers from around the world and it also serves people to function in culturally diverse teams which are considered "the norm for 21st-century work" (Trilling & Fadel, 2009, p. 80). Intercultural competence development also supports the ability to function as citizens in a world that is becoming more interconnected (de Wit, 2010) and in which humankind must collectively address global challenges (Knight, 2008).

Zaharna (2009) claimed that culture by itself does not fully determine how every individual behaves as people of the same culture may differ from one another and personality may also impact the way people think and act. There are various perspectives on what constitutes intercultural competence. To illustrate, hammer *et al*. (2003), focused on the individual by defining intercultural competence as "the ability to think and act in interculturally appropriate ways" (p. 422).

Medina-López-Portillo and Sinnigen (2009) emphasized that intercultural competence should not merely focus on an individual's capacities, but rather on the collective, reporting that the term 'intercultural' in, for instance, Bolivia means "mutual respect of all peoples and cultures" (p. 260). Luo (2013) emphasized that "guanxi" (p. 73), which means to make use of one's connections "to secure favors" (p. 73), is put at the core of intercultural competence because guanxi plays a profound role in Chinese (business) culture.

Deardorff (2006) conducted a grounded theory study, using the Delphi technique, with intercultural scholars, who were mainly from the U.S., to create a consensus definition of intercultural competence. This was based on an evaluation of cognitive, affective, and behavioral components. The following consensus definition of intercultural competence was formulated: "Effective and appropriate behavior and communication in intercultural situations" (Deardorff & Jones, 2012, pp. 286–287). Deardorff and Jones (2012) explained that what is 'effective' is determined by the person who wants to accomplish something in an intercultural situation while 'appropriateness', is determined by the values and norms of the person with whom one wants to accomplish something.

There is a general assumption that when people gain cultural knowledge of their own culture and/or other cultures or when people interact with others who have a different cultural background that this would lead to intercultural competence development (Bennett, 2012; Deardorff, 2009b; Lantz-Deaton, 2017). However, research shows that intercultural competence is not necessarily a default outcome of educational activities that include knowledge transfer of cultures, facilitating a culturally diverse environment, or study abroad experiences (Bennett, 2012; Deardorff, 2009b; Hammer, 2012). Intercultural sensitivity development is, however, "not natural" (Bennett, 1993, p. 21). By tendency, people engage cultural differences through an ethnocentric view rather than through an ethnorelative view (Bennett, 1993; Hammer, 2012; Pusch, 2009).

An ethnocentric view can be defined as "the experience of one's own culture as 'central to reality" (Bennett, 2012, p. 103). Through the tendency of engaging cultural differences with an ethnocentric view, people tend to view intercultural situations through their cultural lens thereby considering their values and behaviors as absolute or universal (Bennett, 1993). Approaching cultural differences through an ethnocentric view also means that one considers cultural differences either as threatening to their cultural values and behaviors or that one considers cultural differences as unimportant (Bennett, 2012).

An ethnorelative view means that one experiences cultural values and behaviors as one among the many possible equal worldviews that exist (Bennett, 2012). Moreover, through an ethnorelative view, one would engage in intercultural situations not merely through the lens of one's own culture, but also through the cultural lens of the other person with whom one is dealing (Bennett, 2012). The move from an ethnocentric position toward an ethnorelative position represents a fundamental shift in one's perception of cultural differences (Bennett, 1993).

II. Internationalization Practices to Develop Students' Intercultural Sensitivity and/or Competence

Generally, it is assumed that when students go abroad, they will develop intercultural competence (Jenkins & Skelly, 2004). Yet, this development is not given because students can opt to live in a cultural bubble abroad by seeking the company of people from their own culture while ignoring the local culture (Engle & Engle, 2004). Even if one were exposed to intercultural encounters abroad this does not mean that one automatically makes meaning out of this by which intercultural sensitivity and competence could be developed (Hammer, 2012). Not surprisingly, authors such as Almeida *et al*. (2012) argued that learning interventions are necessary to develop intercultural competence during study abroad.

Studies about studying abroad without intercultural learning interventions for learners show contrasting findings on participants' intercultural sensitivity and/or competence development. Through mixed-methods studies Bloom and Miranda (2015), using the Intercultural Sensitivity Index and reflective journals, and Fuller (2007), using the IDI and interviews, respectively did not find a significant increase in U.S. students' intercultural sensitivity after they had studied abroad. Fuller (2007) even found no difference in intercultural sensitivity levels, using the IDI, between students who had studied abroad and those who had not. Similarly, in a quantitative study, Behrnd and Porzelt (2012) did not find greater levels of intercultural competence between German students who had studied abroad and those who had not, except for those students who spent more than half a year in a foreign country.

Some studies showed moderately positive or positive results regarding students' intercultural sensitivity and/or competence after studying abroad. In a qualitative study, Grudt and Hadders (2017) found through focus groups and

written assignments that Norwegian nursing students self-reported increased sensitivity to cultural differences while they worked in Nicaragua. It was noticeable that the authors did not discuss the validity or reliability of the student's reflections. This limitation was also found in the research method by Levine and Garland (2015) who reported higher levels of U.S. students' intercultural sensitivity through a qualitative study. The authors stated that these U.S. students provided longer answers to open questions about intercultural issues after studying abroad compared to their answers in the pre-test. However, as this post-test also served as an exam this could have impacted students' answers.

Finally, a noticeable increase in intercultural competence was found through quantitative research by Wolff and Borzikowsky (2018) among German and non-German participants who went abroad for a minimum of three months. This increase stood out compared to results obtained with participants who did not go abroad. Yet, Wolff and Borzikowsky did not make an investigation into the cause(s) of this noticeable increase.

Fuller (2007) suggested that pedagogy could play a role in the development of intercultural sensitivity. None of these ideas however were substantiated or further investigated to provide a more fundamental explanation for their ideas. In several studies, students participated in pre-departure training and onsite training while abroad. These studies show differing results. In none of these studies is an explanation with a more fundamental scientific understanding of intercultural sensitivity and/or competence provided.

Intercultural coursework was implemented by Pedersen (2010), Jackson (2011), and Rust *et al*. (2013) to develop students' intercultural sensitivity before students went abroad. Pedersen's coursework focused on countering stereotypes and reflecting on intercultural experiences. Pedersen found that participants in the coursework had greater gains in their IDI post-test scores after they had returned from their study abroad compared to non-participants who also had studied abroad. Rust *et al*. (2013), designed coursework for experiment groups that consisted of intercultural courses focused on "cultural self-awareness" (p. 5) and knowledge about other cultures and found no significant difference between groups of participants and non-participants in this coursework. Both groups' IDI scores went up after their study abroad (Rust *et al*., 2013). An explanation with an understanding of these results was not found in Rust *et al*. or Pedersen.

In Jackson's (2011) mixed-methods study, IDI post-test results of foreign language students from Hong Kong were obtained after they had participated in pre-departure coursework and again after their study abroad period. Participants' journals with reflections on their intercultural experiences abroad were also collected (Jackson, 2011). Interestingly, Jackson reported that after the intercultural training, which focused on knowledge about other cultures and English literature, more than half of the participants had higher IDI scores. Yet, there was a negligible change in their IDI scores after their study abroad (Jackson, 2011). Jackson found that students' journals reflected their IDI results (Jackson, 2011). No correlation was found between students' levels of foreign language proficiency and their intercultural sensitivity (Jackson, 2011). Jackson's study neither explains the presumed correlations on which the coursework was built, nor does it provide a more fundamental understanding of the effect of the coursework.

In a mixed-methods study, conducted by Chan *et al*. (2018), there is an indication that pre-departure coursework combined with an onsite workshop in an exchange program helped to increase European participants' awareness of cultural differences. Chan *et al*. claimed that the coursework and workshop on cultural differences had supported students' motivation to learn about other cultures leading to intercultural sensitivity development. Yet, this claim, based on qualitative data obtained through online discussions and face-to-face meetings, was not further explored. Therefore, it is not clear which influence may have contributed to increased intercultural sensitivity. A similar claim was made by Xin (2011) in a mixed-methods study in which students from China and Hong Kong participated in a six-month internship program in the U.S. In this study, it was found that students' intercultural sensitivity, measured through the Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory, had significantly developed over time. Moreover, Xin found through focus groups that participants noticed that they became more able in handling intercultural encounters with locals from the U.S. No discussion was provided however on factors that might have caused this development. An often-cited study by Engle and Engle (2004), in which U.S. French language students were immersed and mentored on their intercultural experiences while they were abroad, did not show a correlation between students' intercultural sensitivity level and the immersion program or language acquisition. The lack of a correlation was not explained by the authors.

A common finding in studies without intercultural learning interventions at HEIs' home campuses is that a mere mix of local and international students does not necessarily support the fulfilment of internationalization outcomes (Janeiro *et al*., 2014; Kim *et al*., 2017; Lantz-Deaton, 2017; Németh & Csongor, 2018; O'Brien *et al*., 2019; Su, 2018). Remarkably, this common finding is identified in studies that took place in contexts that differed from one another.

Lantz-Deaton (2017) and Kim *et al*. (2017) respectively conducted a mixed-methods study in the UK and South Korea to assess local students' intercultural sensitivity. O'Brien *et al*. (2019) explored through a qualitative descriptive study local Irish students' experiences of studying with international students. Su (2018) attempted to assess whether there were any predictors of intercultural sensitivity development by studying local Taiwanese students and their interaction with international students.

What stood out from the studies by Lantz-Deaton (2017) and O'Brien *et al*. (2019) was that the assumed influence of intercultural sensitivity and competence development, namely interaction between local students and international students, did not undo local students' ethnocentric views. These results appear to be confirmed by the research results of Kim *et al*. (2017) and Su (2018). To illustrate, Kim *et al*. found through the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale and interviews that while local Korean students showed respect for other cultures, they tended to ignore their international

peers and held negative views about their in-class contributions. Su found no predictors of intercultural sensitivity development. Su (2018) suggested that more intercultural interaction with international students could increase local Taiwanese students' confidence and joy in engaging in intercultural interaction. Yet, those local students who showed confidence in doing this during Su's study also showed higher levels of ethnocentrism. An explanation for this was not provided.

A similarity that was found in the conclusions of the above-cited studies is the point that interventions are needed to develop local students' intercultural sensitivity and/or competence. Yet, what is missing in these studies is an explanation with a more fundamental scientific understanding regarding influences that could help develop learners' intercultural sensitivity. Nonetheless, given the emphasis placed in the literature on the need for intercultural interventions, several studies were examined in which interventions were applied at HEIs' home campuses.

No significant changes were found in students' intercultural sensitivity or competence because of interventions implemented by Altshuler *et al*. (2003), Gordon and Mwavita (2018), and Young *et al*. (2017). Altshuler *et al*. (2003) set up pieces of training focused on cultural values, attitudes, and intercultural issues using presentations, discussions, and self-reflection. Gordon and Mwavita (2018) researched the impact of intercultural coursework on U.S. students and found no significant change in their intercultural sensitivity as measured by the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale. A discussion of the coursework itself and an explanation for the expectation that the coursework would contribute to intercultural sensitivity development are missing.

Studies with intercultural interventions that showed (moderately) positive effects were also identified. Eisenchlas and Trevaskes (2007), who conducted a qualitative case study, and Jon (2013), who conducted mixed-methods research, used the influence of interaction between local and international students in respectively Australia and China. Interestingly, based on in-class observations, Eisenchlas and Trevaskes reported that while in-class discussions did not undo local Australian students' stereotyping of others, an assignment to jointly write an essay with international students about intercultural topics appeared to help local students to look beyond stereotypes. Jon reported through an explanatory sequential design using the IDI and a survey that local Korean students' intercultural competence had developed through their interactions with international peers. It is noticeable however that neither Eisenchlas and Trevaskes nor Jon explained the obtained results.

Other studies, containing qualitative and/or quantitative methods were identified in which interventions were implemented that showed to be effective in developing local students' intercultural sensitivity and/or competence. These effective interventions consisted of using intercultural TV ads (Tirnaz & Narafshan, 2018), teaching intercultural communication and conflict resolution (Behrnd & Porzelt, 2012) and addressing cultural stereotypes in class (López-Rocha & Vailes, 2017). Yet, no scientific explanation is provided by Tirnaz and Narafshan on the apparent correlation between using TV ads and the intercultural sensitivity development of local Iranian students. Likewise, neither Behrnd and Porzelt (2012), who conducted a quantitative study nor in López-Rocha and Vailes (2017), who conducted a mixed-methods study, are more fundamental explanations provided.

III. An Alternative Pedagogical Approach to Intercultural Sensitivity Development

The Creative Action Methodology (CAM) is a pedagogical approach that proposes a theory that could be useful to gain an understanding of why people would or would not develop their intercultural sensitivity toward an ethnorelative view (van Melle & Ferreira, 2022). As described by Delnooz and de Vries (2018) the CAM pedagogy aims to bridge the observed discrepancy between "nature" (p. 2), which refers to the functioning of our brain, and "nurture" (p. 2), the way education in the Netherlands is offered. As explained by Delnooz and de Vries, CAM rests on two principles, namely:

1) "Our brains are not 'made' to learn by heart. They are 'made' to survive. They are focused on solving possible problems" (p. 2).
2) "We live in a culture of the truth" (p. 2) which means that students learn there is only one way to do something correctly or that there is only one correct answer to a question.

Following the first principle, Delnooz and de Vries (2018) described that as the focus of education in the Netherlands is to have students learn by heart, it is expected in the CAM model that this will reduce students' motivation to learn while inducing "oppositional behavior" (p. 2). This point is informed by the findings from Delnooz *et al*. (2012) who reported that when teachers gave instructions while learners sat and listened, students stopped thinking for themselves, were not motivated to learn, and their creativity was being stifled.

Following the second principle, Delnooz and de Vries (2018) described that according to the CAM model, Dutch education's culture of the truth "conflicts with our brains" (p. 2) because it does not trigger problem-solving activities for which our brains are actually "made" (p. 2). Delnooz (2008) and Delnooz *et al*. (2012) reported that when learners were not free to consider alternative perspectives and instead had to learn answers by heart learners did not develop critical thinking skills, analytical skills, and creative skills.

Delnooz *et al*. (2012) built on the work of Lunenberg *et al*. (2007) to explain the prevalence of the culture of truth in Dutch education. That is, Lunenberg *et al*. found that in Dutch education the Research Development and Diffusion (RDD) model prevails. In the RDD model, it is assumed that knowledge can be generated and developed in objective ways (Lunenberg *et al*., 2007). Hence, in the RDD model knowledge is considered free of doubt and it has "the status of absolute truth" (p. 17) which must be transferred by teachers (Lunenberg *et al*., 2007). This knowledge, once incorporated into educational products, must be learned by heart and applied by learners (Delnooz *et al*. 2012).

The argumentation and observations by Delnooz (2008),

Delnooz *et al*. (2012), Delnooz and de Vries (2018) and Lunenberg *et al*. (2007) on how knowledge is treated in Dutch education do not stand by themselves. Verschuren (2002) also reported his observation that in the Netherlands teachers tend to offer certainty to students by offering one perspective only. Consequently, the author observed that students resist having to deal with uncertainty and doubt.

The CAM pedagogy is based on seven parameters to break away from the culture of the truth. These are: thinking conceptually, using practical cases, applying a questioning method, providing advice, using discourse, and giving students both the freedom and the responsibility to make choices (Delnooz, 2008; Delnooz *et al*., 2012). These parameters provide the mental structure (Delnooz *et al*., 2012, p. 58) of a classroom. In this structure, learners are given mental freedom to break away from the culture of the truth as they develop an investigative and open attitude through the development of their critical thinking skills, analytical skills, and creative skills (Delnooz *et al*., 2012).

Critical thinking in the CAM pedagogy means that learners attempt to question or falsify, knowledge by looking at a situation or problem they are presented with from multiple perspectives (Delnooz *et al*., 2012). Analytical thinking in CAM means that learners dissect a problem or situation in logical steps (Delnooz *et al*., 2012). Critical and analytical thinking also means that students can choose a perspective out of multiple perspectives, using arguments backed by evidence for their choice which serves as the basis to design solutions for problems or situations (Delnooz *et al*., 2012). Creativity in CAM means that learners think of multiple solutions to addressing a problem or a case (Delnooz *et al*., 2012). It also means that learners can make their own choice of which knowledge components they use and that they choose which solution(s) they prefer the most.

Within the framework of CAM's parameters learners are not given full mental freedom because teachers still have to decide on the in-class topics, the kinds of questions to be posed, knowledge components to be shared, the advice to be offered and the way discussions are held (Delnooz *et al*., 2012). Moreover, in CAM it is key that teachers know the aims that learners should accomplish and that teachers can use the CAM parameters while making a connection to these aims (Delnooz & de Vries, 2018). The purpose and application of each CAM parameter are discussed next.

Delnooz *et al*. (2012) pointed out that in CAM providing advice means that teachers consider which knowledge components from the literature learners have yet to learn to guide their learning process. The parameter of using discourse serves to have learners' question, falsify, and reflect on the knowledge shared. The parameters of giving students the freedom and the responsibility to make choices, respectively, entail that teachers do not judge students' ideas negatively and that teachers motivate students to reflect, be creative and feel responsible for their choices and work (Delnooz *et al*., 2012).

Using the CAM parameters, learners' critical, analytical, and creative skills improved while learners became motivated to learn (Delnooz, 2008; Delnooz *et al*., 2012; van Melle & Ferreira, 2022). However, in these experiments, the authors found that most learners would initially show resistance to learning according to CAM's parameters (Delnooz, 2008; Delnooz *et al*., 2012). They found that most learners would resist the idea, or show disbelief in the idea, that there are multiple truths or perspectives to look at something (Delnooz, 2008; Delnooz *et al*., 2012). Delnooz (2008) and Delnooz *et al*. (2012) described how in these studies learners felt that their certainties had disappeared when initially confronted by the parameters of CAM.

The initial resistance that arose among students when attempts were made to break away from a culture of the truth in previous research (Delnooz, 2008; Delnooz *et al*., 2012) shows the challenge to intercultural sensitivity development. It shows the challenge to develop one's intercultural sensitivity to the degree that one would consider other worldviews as equally viable and not as a threat. Yet, as reported by Delnooz *et al*. (2012) when using CAM, learners will eventually come to accept a different mode of thinking as, over time, they integrate the idea that there are multiple truths (van Melle & Ferreira, 2022). With a more open mindset rather than a closed mindset, learners can start to handle multiple perspectives including worldviews that differ from their own.

Conflict of Interest

Authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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