

# Intercultural Communication Competence through Experiential Learning: The Importance of Student-Initiated Strategies and Dialogic Encounters

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### Abstract

Approaches to intercultural communication competence (ICC) generally argue the need for objective knowledge about another culture as well as knowledge about and the ability to achieve appropriate behaviors of that target culture. Most of these approaches continue to base themselves on a conception of culture as comprehensive but static. Intercultural contact in this sense is a matter of contrasting and overcoming differences between one's own culture and the host or target culture. Other approaches, however, are adopting a more multicultural and pluricultural view of intercultural competence, and a more fluid and dynamic conceptualization of culture. These approaches tend to see the intercultural dynamic as an opportunity for "third places" to emerge where entirely new cultural knowledge and behavior can be constructed through cross-cultural contact and the interaction process in itself. This view sees cultures not as fixed entities to be learned and then copied, but rather as a hybrid and emergent phenomenon of today's societies. What are needed, it is argued, are individuals who are more aware of their own **linguaculture** in a much deeper way, and who are open to exploring new identities and perspectives as part of their daily contact with others. Here, the other is not only the different culture, with the emphasis on "different," but rather the other may be anyone with whom the individual chooses to interact. This paper explores the Subculture Adaptation Project conducted with third semester students in the bilingual education program at the *Institución Universitaria Colombo Americana*. Students were asked to choose a subculture to which they wanted to or needed to belong, and complete a series of tasks to document the adaptation process. This exercise reveals that students who achieved the greatest degree of adaptation were those who were not limited to focusing on differences between themselves and members of the subculture. Rather, these students consistently sought out emergent third places where they could construct relationships and interactions that brought together self and other in dialogic encounters where new understandings, relationships and identities could emerge.

### Resumen

Distintas propuestas sobre la competencia comunicativa intercultural (CCI) plantean la necesidad de poseer un conocimiento objetivo acerca de la otra cultura, al igual que de la habilidad de adquirir comportamientos propios de ésta. La mayoría de estas propuestas continúan basándose en la idea de que la cultura es amplia, pero estática. En este sentido, el contacto cultural se considera como una cuestión de contrastar y superar las diferencias entre la cultura propia y la cultura huésped u objeto. Otras propuestas, sin embargo, están adoptando una visión más multicultural y pluricultural de la competencia intercultural, y una conceptualización más dinámica y fluida de la cultura. Estas propuestas tienden a concebir la dinámica intercultural como una oportunidad para que aparezcan "terceros lugares" en donde se puedan construir un conocimiento y un comportamiento cultural completamente nuevos por medio del contacto entre-culturas y el proceso de interacción mismo. Esta aproximación asume que las culturas no son entidades rígidas, que deben ser aprendidas y luego copiadas, sino que son un híbrido y un fenómeno que surge de las sociedades de hoy. Se necesita, explican, de personas que sean más conscientes de su **linguacultura** a un nivel más profundo, y que estén abiertos a explorar nuevas identidades y perspectivas como parte de su contacto diario con otros. En este caso, el otro no es sólo la otra cultura diferente, con un marcado énfasis en su carácter de "diferente"; por el contrario, el otro puede ser alguien con quien la persona decide interactuar. Este escrito explora el Proyecto de Adaptación Cultural que se llevó a cabo con estudiantes de tercer semestre de la *Institución*

*Universitaria Colombo Americana*. En éste, se le pidió a los estudiantes que escogieran una subcultura a la que necesitaban o querían pertenecer, y que hicieran una serie de tareas para documentar el proceso de adaptación. Este ejercicio muestra que los estudiantes que alcanzaron los niveles más altos de adaptación fueron aquellos que no se limitaron a enfocarse en las diferencias entre ellos y los miembros de la subcultura que estudiaron. Por el contrario, estos estudiantes buscaron de manera consistente aquellos “terceros lugares” que surgían, a partir de los cuales construyeron relaciones e interacciones que integraban su yo y el otro en encuentros donde se daba el surgimiento de nuevos entendimientos, relaciones e identidades.

**Key words:** Intercultural competence, cultural contact, cultural adaptation, culture, identity.

**Palabras clave:** Competencia intercultural, contacto cultural, adaptación cultural, identidad.

## Introduction

The concept of intercultural communication and more specifically intercultural competence has become more frequent in contexts of foreign language learning since its inclusion in the general competences of the *Common European Framework* (Council of Europe, 2001). Still, many treatments of intercultural competence are based on the concept of culture as a set of fixed parameters for thought and action and intercultural communication as a matter of contrast, essentially, between one’s own and others’ beliefs and behaviors. In this light, intercultural competence is a matter of achieving a smooth transition between one’s own culture and that of others by acquiring objective knowledge about the target culture as well as expertise in and the ability to achieve appropriate behaviors in that culture

Recently, however, other approaches are adopting a more multicultural and pluricultural view of intercultural competence, and a more fluid and dynamic conceptualization of culture. This view sees cultures not as fixed entities to be learned and then copied, but rather as a hybrid and emergent phenomenon of today’s societies (Areizaga, 2001; Carr, 1999; Trujillo Sáez, 2001). Some have compared culture and intercultural communication to the construction of different discourses or realities on an interpersonal or inter-group level (Palfreyman, 2005). The “assumptive world of the individual” (Barna, 1998) is a highly significant, although subjective perspective of reality, and it is common for individuals to routinely encounter difference in their perspectives of the same thing. Difference according to age, gender, profession, religious affiliation, organizational or family membership

are common, and we could argue that distinct perspectives of reality, values and patterns of behavior are constructed within these groups, much in the way they are in different cultures according to an ethnic dimension. Achieving effective communication between members of different groups, not only ethnic or regional groups, is a challenge for living in today's diverse communities. Many authors (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988) consider the role of culture in interpersonal communication much in the way that it has been considered for intercultural communication in the traditional sense.

These latter approaches tend to see the intercultural dynamic as an opportunity for "third places" to emerge where entirely new cultural knowledge and behavior can be constructed through cross-cultural contact and the interaction process in itself (Lo Bianco, J. et al, 1999; Carr, 1999). What are needed, it is argued, are individuals who are more aware of their own **linguaculture** in a much deeper way, and who are open to exploring new identities and perspectives as part of their daily contact with others. Here, the other is not only the different culture, with the emphasis on "different," but rather the other may be anyone with whom the individual chooses to interact. This paper explores the Subculture Adaptation Project conducted with third semester students in the bilingual education program at the *Institución Universitaria Colombo Americana*. Students were asked to choose a subculture to which they wanted to or needed to belong, and complete a series of tasks to document the adaptation process. This exercise reveals indeed that students who achieved the greatest degree of adaptation were those who were not limited to focusing on differences between themselves and the subculture, but rather who sought out emergent third places where they could construct relationships and interactions that brought together both self and other into dialogic encounters where new understandings, relationships and identities could emerge.

### What is culture?

Perspectives about intercultural competence and ideas about how to achieve it are rooted in one's underlying conception of culture. The traditional definition of culture, and perhaps the most common still remains some version of E.B. Tyler's famous 19<sup>th</sup> century statement that culture is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (in Lustig & Koester, 1999, 28). These beliefs, norms and patterns of behavior are also considered to form a hidden superstructure that acts as a filter through which members

of a group see things (Geertz, in Berthoin & Friedman, 2003). This group is usually considered according to an ethnic dimension, that is, as having a distinct country, regional or territorial affiliation, or at least a hereditary dimension since it is assumed that culture is learned and passed along through the generations as well.

While it is still frequently seen and appeals to common sense as well, this traditional definition is accompanied today by other conceptualizations of culture that definitely impact the approach to intercultural communication and attempts at developing or studying intercultural competence. Today's concepts of culture include three important distinctions from the above. First, that culture can involve different domains, and is not an overriding set of norms applicable to all domains that most people inhabit on a daily basis. Second, that it can reside in both the individual and the group (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1998, Palfreyman, 2005). Third, that culture is not a fixed set of parameters, but is rather fluid and emergent, and particularly influenced by the interaction process itself (Fairley, 2000). In this way, culture might not even be the appropriate term, but rather might relate more closely to what is known in post-structuralist theory as a discourse (Foucault, in Palfreyman, 2005; Gee, in Carr, 1999), which is "a way of interpreting and describing the world that is constructed through language and that appears across different contexts" (Palfreyman, 2005, 213).

This new interpretation is highly relevant when attempting to explain and address the difficulties that many people have communicating across boundaries of identity with others of different groups, not just different ethnic groups, but also across boundaries of age, gender, class, organizational or professional affiliation, or even across boundaries of identity constructs such as hobbies, personalities, and subculture identification. Again, while much of the material on intercultural competence refers to culture in the traditional way and perceives intercultural communication as a problem of two different ethnic worldviews coming into contact, for our purposes it is relevant to draw on these latter considerations in order to address, as well, the communication problems most immediate and common in our setting.

Indeed, the subculture project described in this paper assumes the following: First, that interpersonal encounters and interaction across boundaries carry a similar dynamic as intercultural contact in the traditional sense. Second, that experiential learning is possible through a

combination of theoretical study and exercises of reflection relevant to the adaptation process. This learning occurs without the need for intercultural encounters in the traditional sense; i.e. through visits to foreign countries or contact with foreigners. Third, that the project would afford students important lessons for future encounters with others in terms of improved intercultural awareness and communicative competence across cultural and other boundaries and eventually more productive and peaceful relationships in their daily interaction in today's society.

### **Perspectives on Intercultural Competence**

There are a variety of frameworks for dealing with intercultural awareness, communication and competence, as well as the adaptation process to a new culture. Most of these frameworks and models presuppose one or another conceptualization of culture, as discussed above, and may be considered more or less useful to our discussion. Nevertheless, it may be useful to examine several of them here.

### **Traits, Competences and Behaviors**

Most of the models for developing intercultural competence assume the need to possess or acquire specific traits, characteristics, skills or competences in order to be more successful at dealing with members of other cultures, or with other individuals as well (Lambert, 1999; Lustig & Koester, 1999). It is assumed that these items may be identified and in some cases even taught in order to increase an individual's competence. In general, this approach looks for indicators of higher levels of global awareness as well as relativity and include such traits as flexibility, openness, patience, empathy and tolerance for ambiguity. By competence, most agree that the concept includes aspects such as effectiveness as well as appropriateness (Lustig & Koester, 1999). These competences include the ability to establish interpersonal relationships, as well as the awareness of the implications of cultural differences. Other competences are the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately, the ability to adhere to norms and get help and the ability to collaborate in order to accomplish something of mutual interest or need. An obvious, but often overlooked element also includes proficiency in the target language (Fantini, 2001).

Once the process has begun, the development of intercultural competence normally involves an on-going and lengthy process, occasionally even with plateaus and set-backs, and normally with no definable end. Intercultural interactions are considered to be similar

to interpersonal interactions, but with many more variables. We could imagine a continuum of interactions with intimates or strangers within one's own culture, interaction with people within a different subculture, interaction with others from other cultures in the home culture, and interaction with others in the host culture. Each stage on the continuum presents more and more variables that make interactions less and less predictable (Fantini, 2001).

Other approaches include the behavioral, which is not just what people think but what they do. This approach looks at specific communication behaviors during interactions. This approach looks for both the appropriateness and effectiveness of interactions and includes such evidence as the following: display of respect, orientation to knowledge, empathy, task role behavior or how to get something done, relational role behavior or how to relate to others, interaction management, and tolerance for ambiguity (Koester & Olebe, in Lustig & Koester, 1999).

The above traits, competences and behaviors tend to intersect with cognitive, affective and behavioral dimensions of intercultural competence. Some authors, however, devote particular attention to the affective dimension and refer specifically to the development of intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1998; Chen, 1997). Chen, specifically, separates intercultural awareness, sensitivity and competence according to the cognitive, affective and behavioral dimensions, respectively, and gives particular priority to sensitivity as a pre-requisite for the other dimensions to be developed. Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (1998) explores the process of cultural adaptation, beginning in stages of ethnocentrism and moving towards stages of increased ethnorelativism.

### **Goals and Adaptation Development**

One drawback of the above approaches is the lack of attention as to how individuals are expected to acquire the traits, competences, attitudes or behaviors needed to be successful at intercultural encounters. The following approaches devote more attention to issues arising directly out of processes of adaptation and spaces of interaction between selves and others.

Success at acquiring intercultural competence is linked to the purpose and goals of the interaction. For some, a goal might be to achieve native-like behavior; for others, it may be to gain acceptance in the host culture; and for still others, it might be just to survive (Bradford

et al, 1998). Fantini's (2001) YOGA framework or "Your Objectives, Guidelines, and Assessment" allows participants to define their own objectives, guides them throughout the experience and also provides an assessment tool for use at various stages of the process and at the end. This framework is also unique in that it includes both the guest's (outsider) and host's (insider) perspectives. This illustrates well the view of competence mentioned above as being that which is not only effective behavior (from the guest's viewpoint) but also as appropriate behavior (from the host culture perspective). This model includes four dimensions: Educational Traveler, Sojourner, Professional, and Specialist (Fantini, 2001).

The Bhawuk and Triandis model of Intercultural Expertise Development (1996) accounts for the relationship between cultural knowledge, theoretical knowledge and experience in the development of intercultural competence. It includes four categories of expertise along a continuum: lay, novice, expert and advanced expert. Moving along the scale depends on the individual's level of theoretical knowledge and length of time in the host country. It is assumed that more training and theoretical knowledge of intercultural concepts, along with extended stay will develop knowledge (and expertise) at the level of application (knowing how to apply theory to experience) and eventually will allow for automatic knowledge where an individual might know how to behave at the moment of interaction. This model is interesting because it correlates strongly with the experiences of students in the subculture project, described later, where they were able to understand their experiences more deeply through their increasing contact with theoretical knowledge. This model is important as well because it stresses the limited developmental potential in pure experience, and attempts to explain why long-term residents of foreign countries often know how to behave but rarely know why certain behaviors or norms are preferred.

### **Avoiding and Dealing with Cross-cultural Misunderstanding**

Some of the literature about adaptation is specifically interested in the analysis or prevention of cross-cultural misunderstandings. Although considered by many as an out-of-date piece of scholarship, Gordon's 1974 study of homestays in Bogotá, Colombia is quite useful for its challenges, even today, of typical folk wisdom surrounding intercultural encounters, especially in reference to those traits and characteristics thought to be important. Indeed, not only intercultural sojourners, but most people do not normally consider themselves closed, difficult,



arrogant or inflexible people. Yet most people routinely have mild to serious misunderstandings with others on an almost daily basis. The subjects in Gordon's study were all individuals who were highly motivated to live in Colombia and participate in their host families' lives. Still, as Gordon points out, "goodwill and intelligence are not enough" (Gordon, 1974, 3) to prevent unintended but serious misunderstandings capable of undermining not only a guest's ability to adapt to a homestay, but also capable of generating and perpetuating cultural stereotypes on the part of both North Americans and Colombians. Gordon proposes a syllogistic analysis of the situations surrounding misunderstandings where the underlying cultural assumptions and patterns as well as situational premises are the source of many misunderstandings among people who actually have a strong desire or intention to communicate well (Gordon, 1974).

Another interesting perspective on the source of misunderstandings is related to what is known as the "assumptive world of the individual," where one person's individual reality, regardless of cultural background, may be quite distinct in relationship to another (Barnlund, 1998).

...people see the world through templates which force them to construe events in unique ways. These patterns or grids which we fit over the realities of the world are cut from our own experience and values, and they predispose us to certain interpretations. Industrialist and farmer do not see the "same" land; husband and wife do not plan for the "same" child; doctor and patient do not discuss the "same" disease; borrower and creditor do not negotiate the "same" mortgage; daughter and daughter-in-law do not react to the "same" mother.

*The worlds people create for themselves are distinctive worlds, not the same worlds others occupy. They fashion from every incident whatever meanings fit their own private biases. These biases, taken together, constitute what has been called the "assumptive world of the individual." The worlds people get inside their heads are the only worlds they know. And these symbolic worlds, not the real world, are what people talk about, argue about, laugh about, fight about.*

Barnlund (1998, 41).

Later in the subculture project, we will examine this perspective more in detail as participants were given a specific assignment in reference to this concept. Students also found particularly helpful a collection of over-riding caveats, pointing out common errors in intercultural

and even interpersonal communication. Barna (1998) points out six stumbling blocks to intercultural communication that may also be applied to communicating with others even inside the same culture. They are: Assumption of Similarities, Language Differences, Nonverbal Misinterpretations, Preconceptions and Stereotypes, Tendency to Evaluate and High Anxiety.

The preconceptions and stereotypes of others and the preference for similarity especially lead to the practice of "othering." Othering refers to "the ways in which the discourse of a particular group defines other groups in opposition to itself: and Us and them view that constructs an identity for the Other and, implicitly, for the Self" (Woodward, in Palfreyman, 2005). Othering can perpetuate generalizations and stereotypes and cause major barriers to successful communication.

### **Interactional Perspectives**

Related to newer views of culture mentioned earlier, there are also alternative perspectives of intercultural communication competence which perceive culture and intercultural encounters as more fluid and unpredictable in terms of creation, emergence and interaction. Hammer (in Fairley, 2000, 9) states "it is not the communication skill per se that contributes to the various adaptation and or effectiveness outcomes... Rather, it is the individual interactants' judgments of self and other competence based upon the communication performances engaged..." Casmir (in Fairley, 2000) provides a model of intercultural communication that moves away from the unidirectional emphasis of previous models, proposing that the model should mirror the interactionality and participatory nature of real human encounters. He suggests that new cultures can emerge through intercultural interaction since individuals are actually more than the boundaries of cultural norms to which they may belong. This is particularly relevant when viewing subcultures since most individuals move in a fluid fashion from subculture to subculture throughout their daily routines, adapting, modifying and creating themselves in the process, and that it is precisely the qualities that enable this daily adaptation that are the same qualities and competences required when facing "foreign" or "new" cultures and subcultures.

This alternative view sees culture linked to the concept of identity, and cultural identities as emerging, modifiable and situational, negotiated during interactions, much in keeping with the not-only-ethnic, discourse-natured concept of culture outlined earlier. In this view, culture is actually

emerging, dynamic, and created even within the contexts of interaction, subject to change (Casmir, in Trujillo Sáez, 2005). Competence in this context is not characterized by universal or general aptitudes (tolerance, respect, empathy) applicable to any and all situations, but rather dependent on the particular situation or context and one's interaction with it. Intercultural communication is not just for divergent groups or contexts, but is actually characterized by the coming together through interaction and shared experience and the third culture that emerges from this interaction (Lo Bianco et al, 1999).

It is argued that these "third spaces" are in fact the most valuable in terms of their potential for generating opportunities for interaction, dialogue, and even conflict, which at its root provides the most fertile ground for "productive dialogue between existing and new understandings" (Carr, 1999, 106). This approach challenges the need for learning appropriate behaviors or acquiring useful traits for future encounters when it is virtually impossible to predict cultural behavior. Rather, it relies on experience, including failure experience as a teaching tool and rejects the notion that being competent necessarily involves being appropriate. This approach also embraces the newer conceptualizations of culture as a highly emergent, individual and hybrid and views the spaces of interaction between cultural beings as opportunities for **dialogic encounters** and **heteroglossia** (Bakhtin, in Carr, 1999) where many voices come together to form a new culture. It is interesting that precisely this multi-voicing and dialogue were strategies developed by students in the Subculture Adaptation Project.

### The Subculture Adaptation Project

In order to explore these frameworks and theories in a practical and experiential exercise, it may be interesting to document several findings from the "The Subculture Adaptation Project," carried out with third-semester-university students enrolled in the undergraduate Bilingual Education program at the *Institución Universitaria Colombo Americana* in Bogotá, Colombia. The objective of the project was for each student to follow his or her personal process of adaptation to a new subculture. This paper assumes that a subculture can be defined as a slice of the host culture, a group to which one belongs in addition to belonging to the umbrella culture of, for example, Colombians or Bogotanos. Examples of subcultures include professions and families, each with their own rules and patterns of behavior, insider knowledge, discourses and beliefs. Other examples can include those chosen in this study: hip-hoppers, *Millionarios* or *Santa Fé* soccer team fan clubs, gym-goers, or members of classrooms or a particular group

of friends or social circle. The goal of the project was not necessarily that students adapt completely, but to carry out an attempt at the adaptation process and to learn from the experience.

The rationale for the project is connected to the university's philosophy of learning as involving the acquisition of not only content but skills and language as well. Hence, the objective of the course was for students to not only demonstrate knowledge about theories of intercultural communication, but also to carry out systematic chains of action in order to gain and demonstrate competence as well. In the case of intercultural communication, the approach to culture argued above made it possible to carry out experiential learning without an international experience with a "foreign" culture or with the culture of the target language, that being English. As stated above, encounters with members of other subcultures or individuals within one's own culture carry an intercultural dimension that is significant but often overlooked.

In a previous course, Communication Theory, students were exposed to the concept of a subculture, and had spent an entire semester studying insider meaning within the subcultures they belonged to, for example, metal-heads, billiard players, Jehovah's Witnesses, soccer teams, families, musical groups, salsa clubs, Dance-Dance-Revolutionaries, and more. Students were able to observe and analyze all aspects of insider meaning, including symbols and artifacts, use of space and environment, cultural patterns, values and beliefs, verbal and non-verbal communication.

They acquired tools and techniques such as ethnographic fieldnotes, participant observation, use of informants, and had learned to analyze the observed phenomena according to general theories of meaning creation within groups. Two of the most important theoretical figures in the course included Edward T. Hall and Roland Barthes, and students used these frameworks in their analysis of cultural patterns, artifacts, symbols and space. The Intercultural Communication course was an extension of this previous training and provided new theoretical concepts related to cultural variation, the adaptation process, and intercultural competence.



### **Task 1: Choose the Subculture**

The subculture project was divided into four tasks. In the first task, students were asked to choose the subculture to which they wished to adapt and to explain the reasons for their choice. Personal motivations for the choice of subculture differed, but most expressed a real need

and desire to adapt to the group. In three cases, students chose a new class with a new teacher who was a foreigner (North American and British). Other students related their choice to social needs and relationships with friends or boyfriends who belonged to different subcultures that the student felt the need to join: e.g. a different social circle, *Millionarios* and *Santa Fé* soccer team fan clubs, gym-goers.

Many students saw the subculture project as a way to confront their own preconceptions about the group and saw the project as a way to overcome difficulties that they might have experienced previously, or to deal with issues related to difference, miscommunication, misadaptation, and the existence of preconceptions, stereotypes and generalizations.

For example, Angela chose the “*World Deport*” gym where her best friend worked out even though she admitted that “I do not like to exercise and I have a bad preconception about people who go there. For me, these people are superficial and plastic. It means that they only want to look good and they do not care about knowledge.”

Milena chose her boyfriend’s social circle despite previous difficulties. “For me to make an integration with them has been hard because of many reasons. First, I feel unsure of my own knowledge and personality in front of them. Second, my boyfriend’s friends have another style of life. For instance, they have families and other kinds of experiences that I do not have, so their perspective is different from mine.”

Jennifer chose her Research teacher, a North American. She noted that the adaptation would not only involve an individual from a foreign culture, but to a new group of classmates as well. “Besides adapting to my new research teacher, I have to share with people I have not worked with before.”

Most voiced feelings of anxiety and anticipation about facing new situations and new people, nervousness about facing the new experience, but optimism about the project as a way to help them learn how to adapt to new situations. Some even presented a list of objectives, or a plan to mentally visualize how the project would develop.

Viviana wrote, “Based on my experience with my English teacher, who is an American, I am positive that I can learn much more through differences because they lead me to develop adaptation strategies.”

Jennifer says, "Many times I have to tell my research teacher; 'Excuse me, could you please explain...?' It is embarrassing. But I will overcome misunderstandings and later on I will laugh with my classmates about the professor's jokes"

Milena comments, "When I was in my boyfriend's office, I felt a little nervous because there were people I did not know, so I was thinking, 'How do I have to behave here?'"

Angela: "I feel anxious because I know that it can be difficult for since I have to do physical exercise. But, I also want to meet new people and ways of thinking."

### Task 2: "The Assumptive World of the Individual"

This task made reference to a theoretical concept, the "assumptive world of the individual," which students had encountered in Barnlund (1998). This concept is relevant to the development of intercultural competence since it explores the existence of reality from within each individual rather than in reference to an "objective" world outside of our heads. This explains why two cultures, groups, or even individuals can perceive "the same thing" from entirely different perspectives, a phenomenon that lies at the heart of many, if not most, intercultural or interpersonal misunderstandings. This concept is also important because it helps us move beyond the typical consideration of culture as something static and predictable by groups, comprised of predictable common beliefs and patterns of behavior. Rather, it helps us explore culture as something more flexible, emerging and variable, articulated in individual or group discourses.

Most students in this task related an incident that had taken place in their new subculture and then attempted to analyze and explain the basis for misunderstanding through the distance between their own perspective of the event vs. that of the member or members of the subculture.

Angelica writes, "When I saw the police woman in *El Campin*, (football stadium) I smiled like saying 'Hi!' but she thought that I had something strange because of my smile. I did it because I was quite nervous." Angelica was given an extra-complete frisking and had her belt confiscated as a "reward" for her "polite" behavior.

Angela encountered what she considered "strange behavior" on her first visit to the gym. She writes, "The first time I was there I felt

uncomfortable because people looked at me as an alien. After telling my friend how I felt, she told me that they always behave like that with new people... Usually we see, hear, smell and feel according to our own reality, rather than based on the insiders' one....not everybody understands and interpret behaviors in the same way. Today I am conscious about it, and it is really helpful."

Here we can see the emergence of strategies employed by the students as they attempted to investigate the "insider" meaning vs. their own understanding. They used participant observation, informants, sometimes multiple informants, sometimes asking the member of the subculture directly, reflection, class discussion and time as tools to understand the incident from another perspective. Diana writes about her British teacher, "I do not like it when my teacher says 'shut up.' Some of my classmates say that it is a way to control; others interpret this expression as '*callese la jeta*.' After asking my teacher about this phrase, I could understand that she just wants us not to talk among ourselves in order to lead us to ask her in case of any doubt."

Jennifer writes, "'I like risks, or why do you think I am here in Colombia?' It was not funny for me, but it was for most of the class because they already know the kind of jokes that the Research teacher tells. For me he was a little rude. After asking one of my classmates what was so funny about that, I could see the situation from another perspective and could laugh too. Now I am becoming more open minded and respectful while adapting to my subculture."

Viviana used a combination of direct questioning and comparison with her own cultural reference to interpret the following problem:

*"Study all the new reading's vocabulary for the exam." When my English teacher asked me to do that, I thought he was crazy. This is impossible to achieve, and it doesn't make any sense. English 4 readings have 60% new words, and X's favorite phrase is, "I will ask this on the final test." So, in spite of my fear when I am in front of X, I decided to ask him what he means by "study all the new reading's vocabulary." His response was "I do not want you to memorize every single word, just use some of them in your writing. Also, I want you to focus on the main ideas of the readings, not just in new words. Don't worry about it." After our conversation, I asked myself why I was stressed about memorizing all the words. I concluded that it was because in my culture, students are supposed to learn many things by memory. After clarifying*

*this misunderstanding, I realized how different our “assumptive world” was. He asked me something according with his own intentions and worldview, and I understood another thing due to my personal interpretation about it..*

Once students achieved the understanding from another perspective, it aided them in breaking down preconceptions, stereotypes and generalizations since it added a dimension of understanding and empathy. As well, the use of informants to gain insights into the perspective of the other, and establishing dialogue directly with the individual in question or a member of the subculture were important strategies that once developed, students continued to rely on in future encounters. Once established, the continued use of informants and dialogue enabled the students to open third spaces of emergent culture where they could openly explore the issues affecting their entry into the other culture as well as others’ perceptions of them. To the extent that these dialogic encounters were allowed to continue and develop throughout the project, students’ adaptation gained an important dimension absent from other students’ who did not manage to establish such spaces.

Viviana writes, “I had some prejudices about my English teacher. Last semester a friend of mine told me, ‘His speech is not easy to understand. He assigns a great amount of homework. Exams are difficult and they are the only grade along the semester. Also, he is not friendly at all.’ Fortunately, now I am aware of how harmful it is to keep those prejudices, so facing the situation is a good chance to get rid of them. The high degree of interaction I developed during classes and out of them helped me a lot to know and adapt to my English teacher.”

### **Task 3: Where am I on the Adaptation Scale?**

In this task, students were asked to place themselves on the Bhawuk and Triandis’ scale of intercultural expertise. This scale makes reference to the interplay between theoretical knowledge, culture-specific knowledge and experience, and their effect on the individual’s adaptability to a foreign culture. (Bhawuk & Triandis, 1996). Most students placed themselves between novice and expert stages, with some feeling that they were more towards the novice and others more towards the expert. After placing themselves on the scale, they gave concrete evidence to support their decision.



Most students discussed the role of theoretical knowledge and its usefulness for helping them adapt to the new subculture. Key to reaching the “associative” stage of the scale and moving to be an “expert” is acquiring the ability to apply theoretical knowledge to practical experience. This relationship does not become automatic where the person naturally knows how to behave until the “advanced expert” stage, but at the associative stage, the person at least is able to make the link between what he or she experiences and what intercultural theory might lend to that experience. In our case, it helped students analyze their experiences, although often after the fact.

When analyzing their ability to apply theory, students referred frequently to Edward T. Hall’s discussion of cultural patterns (Hall, 1959, 1969, 1976) studied in the previous semester. It is interesting to note that students found his theoretical insights into cultural patterns useful even in the new class.

In most assessments, students mentioned that they had successfully adapted to the subculture enough in order to carry out basic interaction as part of the group without feeling as much like an outsider with no idea what to do. Most said that they felt fairly comfortable when being in the group, in social situations, knew when to laugh, could follow the social interaction and basically felt okay.

Jennifer writes, “I have applied in my research class what I have learned in Intercultural Communication class, so I can say that theory is helpful to face and understand differences. Taking into account my experiences in research class, I consider that my level of theoretical training is high because when I face new situations I analyze differences, common symbols, expressions, and so on; theory and experience must go together.”

Milena explains, “Despite of the fact that I felt uncomfortable and anxious with my boyfriend’s co-workers because of their age and knowledge, I am trying to adapt using the theory I have learned. During my process of adaptation there, once I talked with one of my boyfriend’s friends and I realized that she was not as I thought. So, I am sure that theory leads me to be open-minded, and helps me a lot to get rid of generalizations.”

The only exception was Angelica who did not feel that she had adequate knowledge about soccer or enough theoretical knowledge to apply to her experiences in *El Campín*. She still felt like a novice. She writes, “I do not know what theory I can apply when I am interacting with unfamiliar people or subcultures. When I was in *El Campín*

watching a game, I felt tired so I sat down. As soon as I did, people looked at me in a bad way. Later my boyfriend explained that people there do not sit down until after the first 45 minutes of the game." In spite of his explanation, Angelica was upset because she considered that she had a right to sit down if she was tired.

Most students felt that in spite of their progress, they still had many things to learn and continued to experience misunderstandings or continued to struggle with difficulty accepting members of the other subculture. Some students began wondering if there were limits to adaptation. Milena writes, "I met a man (in the group) with a sexist attitude. This... made me feel so uncomfortable and also caused me to make strong generalizations about him because according to my own perspective, this way to behave was disgusting and disrespectful... So, I could not avoid my own perception about his personality." Again, students pointed to a variety of tools, skills and strategies they had developed to understand members of the subculture and to read encounters and experiences through the eyes of theory. Most felt that the theory allowed them to be more aware of difference and aware in general. Again, strategies were used successfully to deal with miscommunications and to avoid "bumps." These strategies included participant observation and analysis afterwards, speaking to informants, reflection, discussion of incidents in Intercultural Communication class, and analysis. Frequently time and more experience aided in the students' ability to adapt and move on the scale.

Diana writes, "I am moving from the novice to the expert stage since I have developed some strategies like the identification of artifacts, symbols, cultural patterns, use of space, and power relationships. Noticing these variables is possible through out observation, fieldnotes, participant observation, data analysis, reflection, having informants, asking the person directly and so on. Based on my experience, I consider that theory and practice are really helpful to understand unfamiliar situations and reach adaptation."

#### **Task 4: Final Conclusions**

In the fourth and final task of the project, students were asked to write a report about the state of their adaptation to the subculture they had chosen. They were to give specific examples to discuss the extent of adaptation, gauge the level of success of the adaptation, and specific reasons why they had or had not successfully adapted.

In this exercise, the degree of success depended to a great deal on how the student defined adaptation, and to his or her own personal goals in terms of the extent to which he or she needed definitely to

become a part of the subculture, or perhaps to simply understand it. Also, this personal objective of adaptation also had to do with the personal investment each individual had of belonging to the group and to what extent.

In Milena's case, there were very high expectations as well as high stakes involved in her belonging to her boyfriend's social circle. Therefore, she continued, in spite of her successes, to have a great deal of anxiety about her adaptation, and tended to become frustrated each time there were difficulties in her complete adaptation. On the other hand, she had managed to find a friend among the group, and this ally enabled her to link herself more into the social circle and achieve a sense of belonging. She also discovered that interaction with her boyfriend's group of friends was easier outside the office in "neutral" spaces like in soccer games since the topics of conversation were not about knowledge or money. "During the soccer game, I had the opportunity to talk with some of them about my studies without feeling anxious or ashamed...once, while I was waiting for my boyfriend in his office I met Y; it was nice because after our long conversation I could realize that my assumptions about her personality were wrong."

Clearly for the students there were different goals in terms of the levels of adaptation they had hoped to achieve. For some, it was just a matter of facing a new group of people and understanding them better, being able to deal with the anxiety of entry into a new group. As soon as these people felt that they knew the group better and could interact on a basic level, they felt that their adaptation had been complete.

In Jennifer's case, she felt that she had been successful adapting to the research class of the North American teacher. She stated that she had been able to learn the system and the rules and was able to follow the class. In other words, she knew what she had to do to get along in the course and could follow the class sessions better, knew when to laugh at the teacher's jokes, and generally felt that she fit in fairly well in the class. She had also developed strategies to find out what she had to do. So, in relation to her goals and definition of what adaptation is, Jennifer felt herself to have been successful. "Adapting to my new class was kind of easy because sometimes my classmates helped me to understand and solve misinterpretations and misunderstandings. Also, I checked the website that the teacher had designed for clearing up doubts and read his class summaries. I consider that I have adapted to the class since I know the flow of the

course, I understand more when my teacher speaks, and I feel much more comfortable because I am doing the right thing; I am not lost any more.”

Viviana chose the same teacher but her view of adaptation was slightly different from Jennifer’s. For Viviana, the preconceptions and generalizations she had about the teacher were the basis for her choosing that particular subculture because she instinctively knew that she should confront those preconceptions in order not to perpetuate the stereotyping of the teacher among her classmates. So, in her eyes, adaptation was not only to the structure and routines of the class, but to the teacher as a person who is new, different and unknown. In order to adapt to the subculture, to the course, she had to learn to adapt to the person and to confront her biases. Viviana was also able to develop the strategy of dialogue as a mechanism to clarify class questions with the teacher and also as an important vehicle to open the door for further communication with the teacher. It is through this dialogue that she got to know the teacher as a person and modified her preconceptions based on first hand experience rather than gossip. “Once I asked my teacher to clarify some rubrics and he told me, ‘Don’t worry about my strong suggestions. You got it!’ Then I realized that the communication problem between us was not language or the class itself, rather it was because of biases. So, I began to talk with him after classes about him as a person since I wanted to face preconceptions. Currently, I consider that free of prejudices and assumptions, we are having a nice relationship.”

It is important to note that all students who completed the project felt that they had been successful at their adaptation to the subculture although each clearly had a different notion as to what adaptation would entail and their own personal goals in the project. It is also important to note that the students were able to make this adaptation through a combination of theory, experience and the development of specific skills and strategies. Students frequently mentioned the theories outlined above as a framework for understanding difference. They also resorted frequently to fieldworking skills they had learned in the previous semester as a way to observe and analyze culture. Further, all students benefited from the space for analysis and distance that were possible over time due to the restriction of most experiences to discreet “entries” into the subculture rather than constant exposure.

Perhaps more importantly, it is possible to posit a relationship between the degree of complexity and penetration of students’ interactions

and the need for not only theory but also independent strategies for understanding, coping and analyzing what they experienced. Particularly in the cases of Milena and Viviana, the desire to create dialogic third spaces with members of the subcultures they had chosen led to more complex interactions and ultimately more features of emergent third cultures characterized by sustained interaction and the construction of new discourses among the members.

### Conclusion

Several factors proved to be significant in students' experiences in the Subculture Adaptation Project: theoretical awareness of culture and intercultural communication, the development and use of strategies, and the emergence of on-going dialogic encounters. Students who employed all three in the analysis and reflection of their experiences in the project tended to achieve greater degrees of penetration, sustained contact and interaction, and eventually adaptation to the group or to individuals in the group. Students who primarily considered difference and the contrast of one's own beliefs and behaviors with others' tended to achieve recognition of and sometimes understanding of difference, but failed to establish third spaces of dialogue or on-going interaction. It is interesting to note as well that where these third spaces were absent, the construction of new cultural knowledge and behaviors, new identities and interculturality in its hybrid and dynamic sense were not achieved.

It is important to note that of the three significant factors affecting students' adaptation in the project, the only aspect explicitly considered in the tasks assigned in the project was the need for theory when approaching experiential learning. The two other factors, development of independent strategies and third spaces of dialogue and construction of interculturality, were not specifically predicted as important or significant. As the strategies began to emerge in students' practice, the professor did call the other students' attention to what she considered significant developments. However, the concept of third spaces was never included explicitly in the project in the moment it was being carried out.

This is relevant to the extent to which students might have actually gained higher or more significant levels of adaptation had these other elements been explicitly worked into project tasks and the respective reflection, analysis and discussion of them. Had students known about the possibility or need for establishing dialogue and third spaces for new cultural construction, and had tasks been constructed that would have sought to invite precisely these types of considerations

in the subcultures, students might have been able to achieve more experience of that kind. As it stands, dialogue and strategies were developed in a completely independent and spontaneous fashion by the students. It would be important to devote more precise and structured attention to these aspects in future projects.

Still, a striking similarity has emerged between this experience and newer considerations of culture and intercultural communication outlined at the outset of this paper. However, as with many of the approaches to intercultural competence outlined above, there tend to be a surplus of available models but a lack of grounded research applying or exploring these frameworks. If, for example, the basis for strategy development and dialogue is to be explored further, it will be important to develop a more structured approach to research with these considerations in mind, as well as many more experiences from which to draw conclusions.

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## Appendix

### Tasks for the Subculture Adaptation Project

#### Subculture project: Task 1

Choose the subculture you wish to use for the first course project. Write a brief (1-page) explanation of why you have chosen the particular subculture, and describing the degree of interaction you will be able to have with that subculture. If you wish to use a subculture which you only have limited interaction with, please propose a way to work with the deadlines outlined by the course.

#### Subculture Project: Task 2

Complete the following task based on fieldwork in your subculture. Kelly (in Barnlund, 1998) argues that individuals and cultures create and use different templates, patterns or grids to see the world, that things we assume are common are not, in fact, the same for everyone, even the child is not the same child according to the different interpretations by the husband or wife. Barnlund goes on to argue that the worlds people create for themselves are distinct, not the same, and that they constitute the "assumptive world of the individual." It is the only world they know, and these symbolic worlds, not the real world are what people talk about, etc.

In the subculture you are studying, demonstrate these different worlds. Choose several aspects to compare, for example, ideas, facts, artifacts, people. Analyze to what extent the subculture's perception or interpretation of that aspect is the same or different as your own. Explain how the two perceptions differ. For example, explain the meaning in your subculture and then the meaning according to the perception of the subculture you are studying. Submit a 1-2 page report about your findings.

#### Subculture Project: Task 3

For the following task, please refer to Bhawuk and Triandis' chart of intercultural expertise. Use the information in the article to place yourself on the chart in reference to the subculture you are working on.

Use concrete evidence from your experience in your subculture (and from your theoretical training in our courses) to explain why you placed yourself where you did on the chart. For example, what degree



of theoretical training do you think you have? How have you applied that theoretical knowledge in the subculture experience? What level of experience do you have in the new subculture? How has this growing experience helped you to be able to adapt into the culture? Write up your ideas in 1-2 pages.

#### **Subculture Project: Task 4**

Please write a report about the state of your adaptation to the subculture you have chosen. Give specific examples to discuss the extent of your adaptation into this subculture. Do you feel that you have, indeed, been successful in your adaptation? Discuss the specific reasons why you have or have not successfully adapted. Your report should be 2-3 pages long, and you should prepare a short 5-10 minute oral report for class.

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