

Exploring interculturally competent teaching in social sciences classrooms

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Biography

Darla K Deardorff is executive director of the Association of International Education Administrators, a national professional organisation based at Duke University, where she also teaches cross-cultural courses. In addition, she is an adjunct professor at North Carolina State University (NCSU) and the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and is on faculty of the Summer Institute for Intercultural Communication in Portland, Oregon. She has received numerous invitations from around the world to speak on her research on intercultural competence and assessment and is a noted expert on these topics. With nearly 20 years of experience in the international education field, she has published widely on topics in international education, including *The SAGE handbook of intercultural competence* (Sage, 2009) and serves as a consultant and trainer on intercultural competence development and assessment. Dr Deardorff holds a master's and doctorate from NCSU, where she specialised in international education. Her dissertation, on the definition and assessment of intercultural competence, has drawn national and international attention, and her intercultural competence models developed through the research are being used by organisations and educational institutions worldwide.

Abstract

This paper explores a grounded research-based framework for intercultural competence and discusses the implications of interculturally competent teaching in the classroom and beyond. Given the importance of teachers being interculturally competent in today's diverse classrooms, a number of questions, based on the framework, are presented, which guide teachers in reflecting upon their own teaching practice and the ways in which they integrate aspects of intercultural competence into their classrooms. The paper also provides some examples from the USA of ways in which intercultural competence development is being addressed in teacher training.

Keywords: intercultural competence, teaching, cultural differences, classroom

Our very survival has never required greater co-operation and understanding among all people from all places than at this moment in history ... when we open our hearts and our minds to those who may not think like we do or believe what we do – that's when we discover at least the possibility of common ground.'

US President, Barack Obama

Consider whether the following would be a good idea in all cultures, in some cultures or in no cultures:

- Instructors should start the class on time, even if some students haven't yet arrived.
- Instructors should lecture for almost the entire class period so students can get as much information as possible.
- Instructors should use humour and jokes to make the class interesting to students.
- To help students feel comfortable in class, the instructor should sit casually on the desk and encourage students to call him or her by their first name.
- Instructors should encourage students to participate actively in the class by asking questions and taking an active role in class discussions.

These statements have been used in faculty training to explore ways in which teachers' beliefs impact on their interactions in an intercultural classroom. What are teachers' beliefs related to these statements? How are teachers' responses culturally conditioned? What might be the responses from teachers in other cultures to these statements on classroom teaching practice? What might be the responses from students in different cultures? As faculty members and schoolteachers face students with an ever-increasing diversity of backgrounds and cultures, it becomes imperative that education addresses what it means for teachers to be interculturally competent in working with students from a great variety of backgrounds and experiences. As teachers become more interculturally competent, they can help to guide their students towards greater intercultural competence. But what does it mean to be an interculturally competent teacher? This paper discusses a grounded theory-based model of

intercultural competence and explores questions and the implications of this model in teacher education and the social science classroom, as well as highlighting practical ways to development this competence using technology.

A framework for developing intercultural competent teachers

What does an interculturally competent teacher look like? This complex concept has been defined by numerous scholars over the past five decades (for a thorough discussion on definitions, see Spitzberg and Changnon, 2009). Despite the complexity and ambiguity of this concept, over 20 leading intercultural experts (primarily in the USA although one was in the UK and one in Canada) reached a consensus on the specific elements of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006). The results of this research-based study were placed in a visual model of intercultural competence (see figure 1 below).

The starting point, or foundation, for intercultural competence is with the teacher's attitudes. This study found that three key attitudes were necessary before intercultural competence could be further developed: openness, respect and curiosity. Given these requisite attitudes, teachers can explore questions related to their own attitudes such as:

- How truly open am I to those from different cultural, socio-economic and religious backgrounds?
- Do I make quick assumptions about a student? Do I prejudge students or situations, or do I withhold judgment while I explore the multifacets of the situation?
- Do I measure a student's behaviour based on my own culturally conditioned expectations or do I try to understand a student's behaviour based on his or her own culturally conditioned background?
- Do I value those from different backgrounds? How do I demonstrate that I value others, even when I may disagree with their beliefs and opinions?
- Am I eager to learn about different cultures and, specifically, am I eager to learn about my students' backgrounds and experiences? Do I make an effort to learn more?

Once the requisite attitudes of openness, respect and curiosity are in place as a foundation for intercultural competence, teachers can hone their knowledge and skills. What knowledge is needed to become more interculturally competent? One of the essential pieces of knowledge is that of 'cultural self-awareness'. This means that individuals are able to describe the lens through which they see the world, including underlying culturally conditioned values that impact on their own behaviours and understanding of others' behaviours. Often, teachers need impactful intercultural experiences in other cultures to be able to hone this cultural self-awareness. While it is ideal for such experiences to occur outside one's own country, unfortunately that has proven not to be the case for many teacher candidates in the USA, and teacher education is cited as one of the least internationalised curricula in the States (Heyl and McCarthy, 2003).

Other important components of knowledge needed to help develop a more interculturally competent teacher include culture-specific knowledge, especially a deeper understanding of worldviews, historical contexts and other influences on a culture. It should be noted that only one aspect was agreed upon by all the intercultural experts in this study: that it was essential to be able to understand the world from others' perspectives. Given these aspects of interculturally competent knowledge, the following questions could be explored further by teachers:

- Can I describe my own cultural conditioning? For example, what cultural values impact on how I behave and communicate with others? What are some of my core beliefs and how have they been culturally influenced?
- How would I describe my worldview?
- How would I describe some of the students' worldviews? How might these differ from the ways in which I see the world?
- How much do I know about my students' cultural backgrounds? What information am I missing and how can I get that information?
- How can I incorporate my students' worldviews into my course materials?
- What worldviews are demonstrated through the course materials I currently use? How can I enhance those materials so that other worldviews are represented?

With regard to the skills that are needed by the interculturally competent teacher, the two most valuable skills include those of listening and observing. In addition, it is important for teachers to know how to relate and evaluate the knowledge that they obtain. The skills found in this intercultural competence model point to the importance of process and of engaging in active reflection – on one's teaching practice, on one's intercultural interactions. These skills lead to questions such as:

- How much do I really listen to my students?
- Do I engage in active observation in my classroom, paying attention to subtle nuances and dynamics among my students, and in my interactions with my students?
- Do I engage in active reflection on my teaching practice and on my interactions with those from different cultural backgrounds? Do I seek to understand why something occurred and what lessons can be learned from the situation?
- Do I know how to evaluate interactions and situations through an intercultural lens, seeking to understand the underlying cultural explanations for what occurred?

A valuable tool to use in honing one's skills in intercultural competence is the OSEE tool (Deardorff and Deardorff, 2000, as cited in Deardorff, 2008). The OSEE tool (see figure 2) starts with the basics of observation – and listening, of really being aware of what is occurring in intercultural situations. As noted in the intercultural competence model discussed in this paper, this is an essential skill and a key starting point. The next step is to state as objectively as possible what is happening. This is much more difficult than it sounds, and a variety of activities can be used to help one practise the development of objective statements, including viewing brief film clips and writing about them. The next step – that of exploring different explanations – addresses the need to see from others' perspectives. It also allows one to begin to move beyond the initial assumptions that may have inadvertently been made. Different explanations could include personal and cultural explanations, the latter necessitating the need to know culture-specific information. The last step – that of evaluation – is the most difficult, since it is often challenging to know which explanation(s) is the most likely for the situation occurring. There are a number of different ways to evaluate the likely explanations, including collecting further information through conversations with others and through asking questions. When these steps are followed, one is able to view behaviours more objectively, thus achieving a measure of intercultural competence.

Once the requisite attitudes, knowledge and skills are in place, these can lead to what is termed an 'internal outcome', which encompasses a teacher's flexibility, adaptability, empathy and ability to truly see from multiple worldviews, beyond their own way of seeing the world. These aspects lead to questions such as:

- Do I know how students want to be treated or do I assume they want to be treated by my cultural standards?
- Am I able to adapt my behaviour and communication style to accommodate students from different culturally conditioned communication styles?
- Am I able to be flexible in responding to students' learning needs, seeking to understand those needs from their cultural perspectives?
- Can I easily view knowledge, cultural artifacts or a situation or issue from multiple perspectives?

Such flexibility, adaptability and empathy leads to what is termed an 'external outcome', defined as appropriate and effective behaviour and communication in intercultural interactions. Here, the words 'appropriate' and 'effective' are critical: while 'effective' refers to whether the teacher has met his or her own goals, 'appropriate' refers to the manner in which those goals were achieved. In this case, the students will know whether the teacher has truly been culturally appropriate in the interaction. This external outcome leads to questions such as:

- How culturally appropriate have I been in my interactions with my students? And in my teaching? How would my students answer this question?
- Was I able to meet my goals in an appropriate and effective manner?
- What could I do differently in the future to be more appropriate and effective in my communication and behaviour, both in my interpersonal interactions and in my teaching?

Given how important reflection is to intercultural competence development, figure 3 contains a self-reflection instrument which teachers can use in determining how they

rate themselves on some of the aspects of intercultural competence discussed in this paper. To gain a more holistic view of one's intercultural competence, it is helpful to have such an instrument completed by others (particularly those from a different cultural background) so teachers can receive feedback from others' perspectives.

This paper has discussed aspects of intercultural competence as found in the first research-based study that documents consensus on this complex concept among leading intercultural experts. Given the very nature of intercultural competence, it is important to point out the limitations of the study, in particular that this resulting model is a western and specifically a USA-centric model of intercultural competence. How do non-western cultures view intercultural competence? Some cultures, such as Indian cultures, view intercultural competence more holistically – as the oneness of all, despite differences. Other cultures, such as some African and Arab cultures, view intercultural competence as more relationship-based. Take, for example, the African concept of ‘Ubuntu’ – ‘I am because we are and we are because I am’. (For further discussion of other cultural perspectives on intercultural competence, see *The SAGE handbook of intercultural competence*, 2009, edited by Deardorff.)

Developing intercultural competence in teachers

Now that we’ve explored what intercultural competence is, how can it be developed in teachers – and in students? Within American higher education, there is a great need to address intercultural competence development in the schools of education that are training future teachers. Such development also needs to be addressed more fully through teacher in-service opportunities. Currently too little is being done in this regard within the USA. However, some attempts are being made. Kent State University encourages its teacher education students to engage in student teaching overseas through a programme known as COST – Consortium on Overseas Student Teaching. Since its inception in 1973, over 600 student teachers have gained experience in teaching in other countries. Goals of the programme include gaining first-hand experience in another culture, exploring non-US perspectives on world events, teaching in a bilingual setting and considering ways to bring an international perspective back to classrooms in the USA (for further details, go to <http://teachabroad.ua.edu>). Similar programmes include the International Teacher Education Program (ITEP) in the California State University System, and the Cultural Immersion Projects at Indiana University (Cushner, 2009).

The University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill offers a semester-long graduate course on intercultural competence development specifically for social science teachers. (This course is taught by the author – for further details, contact the author.) The course delves into theories related to cultural values, communication styles and applications of theory to the classroom, and includes a cultural immersion experience requirement in the local community with the option of going abroad on a short-term learning experience. A version of the graduate course is also offered through UNC in the form of a six-week online course for current schoolteachers, who obtain an in-service learning credit upon completion of the course. This online course includes two offline assignments including weekly face-to-face meetings with a person from a different cultural background as well as the cultural immersion experience in the community. Comments from teachers who have completed the course include:

‘I initially believed that I was a pretty open-minded, accepting person when I entered this class. I entered it hoping that I would be exposed to material to help the Diversity special interest group that I facilitate at our school. Little did I know that I would be exposed to material that changed my own perspective of diversity forever.’

‘The cross-cultural immersion experience (in the Durham community) was life changing! I was really uncomfortable but I learned so much. I thought it was all wonderful!’

‘I think the thrust of this course was to begin the eye-to-eye conversations so that we could really get to know other people as human beings and stop labelling ... and to stop looking at people according from an objective viewpoint.’

‘I think this knowledge will be extremely helpful [to me] as a teacher to keep me from jumping to conclusions about the way children act. I will be more tolerant of conflicting views.’

‘I would definitely recommend this course. It is very worthwhile for anyone but especially for teachers. Is there a movement for a course of this nature to become a required undergraduate class?’

'This class has caused me to think consciously about my cultural background and the values I hold. It has helped me realise the extent to which these values were shaped by my culture. I can better appreciate and value my own.'

'It's amazing what a difference this course has made to many of us – encouraging us to open our minds and eyes to experiences that we otherwise wouldn't have cared for. Now if only the rest of the world would take just one step to understanding each other's cultures, what a difference it just might make!'

Another educational institution addressing the internationalisation of teacher education is the College of Education at the University of Maryland (UMD). According to the college:

'In no other time has the importance of global competence and intercultural understanding been greater. Students at all levels need to be more cognizant of the world outside their own communities and outside of the US; and they need to be equipped to solve problems of a global nature, with international players, if they are going to cope successfully with an increasingly interconnected future. There is no way to achieve this goal if their teachers and educational leaders are not themselves informed and comfortable with international points of view.'

In 2008, UMD's College of Education established an office of international initiatives to support this vision of internationalising the college. Goals include increasing students' participation in research, study and interning overseas, supporting faculty to internationalise their courses and promoting research on international issues by faculty. The endeavours of UMD's College of Education point to the importance of institutional support for efforts to internationalise the teacher education curriculum as well as recognising the key role that the education faculty has in graduating teachers who are prepared to successfully teach students from diverse backgrounds. (For further details on these efforts at UMD's College of Education, go to www.education.umd.edu/international/strategicplan.html.)

As noted above, the education faculty plays a key role and can therefore greatly benefit from specific seminars and workshops on intercultural competence development. As an example, some members of faculty at the University of Copenhagen participated in an afternoon seminar on this topic. As a result, it developed a school-wide project on 'best practices in the intercultural classroom'. From that project emerged information such as the importance of expectations (from both teachers and learners), the value of incorporating students' cultural perspectives into course discussions, the role of the classroom environment on students' learning (and in meeting students' learning needs), the importance of being aware of cultural bias in course materials, and the intricacies of group work involving students from different backgrounds.

In developing such courses, workshops and seminars, it is possible to incorporate various technologies – such as YouTube and iTunes U video clips, blogs and wikis, social networking, Second Life and WebQuests (See Rock and Passe, 2004) – and connecting online with counterparts and/or with students in similar courses in other cultures. One example is the North Carolina in the World programme that uses technology to connect schools in North Carolina to schools in other countries to collaborate as members of a multinational team on school-related projects (see <http://ciu.northcarolina.edu/content.php/ncworld/school%20partnerships.htm>). Numerous other examples of how technology can be utilised to further help develop teachers' and students' intercultural competence could be listed. Online comments and ideas are welcome on this article and on other ways to develop intercultural competence through technology.

In developing teachers' intercultural competence, it is important to keep the following in mind. Intercultural competence doesn't just naturally occur in most people; rather, intercultural competence must be intentionally addressed through education. This paper has discussed some ways to do just that. Furthermore, intercultural competence development is a lifelong process – one doesn't become magically intercultural competent after completing one course or going on an education abroad experience in another country. Thus, it ultimately becomes important to think about how one can develop an intercultural lifestyle which regularly incorporates ways in which to learn

interculturally on a daily basis. Such an intercultural lifestyle would ideally mean that one has developed relationships with people from a variety of different backgrounds, and continues to seek out new information, regardless of how experienced or knowledgeable one becomes about other cultures. It also means that teachers go beyond teaching 'objective culture', which refers to the cultural products (literature, music, food, etc), to also teaching about 'subjective culture' (the exploration of underlying cultural values, beliefs, and so on) (Triandis, 1994). This also means that teachers move beyond professing 'colourblindness' when teaching, so that they acknowledge and utilise the cultural differences in their classrooms to help students further develop intercultural competence. As Clayton (2003) states, 'being colorblind denies the very identity of people who are not brought up the same way as we were; it taps into our subconscious ethnocentrism' (p 45). It therefore becomes imperative for teachers to seek ways to incorporate materials on deeper cultural values and beliefs into the classroom, teaching 'the what of those differences' and investigating 'the why', and ultimately 'having our perspective transformed from the ethnocentric one we start with to one that encompasses a new world view' (Clayton, 2003: 170). In so doing, it is important for teachers to reach beyond the classroom into the community, to explore available resources and interested partners in further developing students' intercultural competence. Brown and Kysilka (2002) note: 'Effective teachers realize the importance of allies in educating their students. They understand that they alone cannot possibly provide all the resources and information necessary to lead students toward active participation in the local and global societies' (p 200).

In reflecting on how teachers can help development students' intercultural competence, the following questions arise:

- How can teachers specifically incorporate students' cultural perspectives into the course?
- How can teachers allow space for students to reflect on their own intercultural competence development?
- What role can teachers play in mentoring students in this development?

- What role can others in the broader community play in developing students' intercultural competence?
- What role can technology play in students' development of knowledge and skills in relating to those from different backgrounds?
- How can teachers help students demonstrate respect (in culturally appropriate ways) and openness to other ways of viewing the world?
- How can students work together effectively and appropriately in small groups during the course?
- How can teachers move beyond 'objective culture' in the classroom to pushing students to learn more about 'subjective culture' which impacts on the ways in which students actually interact with others?
- How can teachers help students develop an 'intercultural lens' through which to view the world? (Or, as Derek Bok (2006) proposed, how can we teach students to 'think interculturally'?)

Broader implications

Higher education needs to examine carefully its current teacher education programmes in relation to training intercultural competent teachers. Intercultural competence development must become core to teacher education. To that end:

- How can schools more intentionally address this?
- What forms of accountability and assessment can schools build into their programmes to determine if they are indeed graduating intercultural competent teachers? (For more on assessment of intercultural competence, see Deardorff, 2009.)
- What changes need to be made to the curriculum?
- What can members of faculty within higher education do to become more intercultural competent?

As humanity faces many daunting issues that impact on our very survival, the development of intercultural competence becomes even more urgent. Teachers who

have been adequately prepared play a vital role in developing interculturally competent citizens of the world. As Martin Luther King Jr said, 'We must learn to live together as brothers, or perish together as fools.' And returning to the quotation at the beginning of this article, President Obama stated recently, 'Our very survival has never required greater co-operation and understanding among all people from all places than at this moment in history.'

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