**Intercultural Learning**

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**Synonyms**  
Intercultural development; Intercultural skill acquisition; Intercultural transformation

**Definition**  
Intercultural learning refers to the acquisition of knowledge and skills that support the ability of learners to both understand culture and interact with people from cultures different from their own. It is developmental in the sense that learners advance through stages of progressively more sophisticated stages of understanding. This understanding includes that of different cultures as well as their own. Specifically, to develop cultural awareness, it is important for a learner to have this sense of *cultural self-awareness* which will form the basis for comparisons that are inevitably made by the learner. Intercultural training can be designed to be *culture specific* by dealing with a single target culture, such as Japanese, or *culture general* by focusing on universally applicable skills, such as perspective taking and active listening. Development of intercultural competence can be a lengthy and stressful process for many as it requires a complex blend of cognitive, emotional and attitudinal change to occur.

**Theoretical Background**  
Since World War II, steady increases in international business, travel, education, and diplomacy have created widespread interest in intercultural learning. Countless business and military training programs on cultural awareness and intercultural communication have been created, as well a large body of interdisciplinary academic research. Acquiring intercultural knowledge and skills represents a special category of learning that requires consideration of cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and attitudinal factors. While no single definition of culture or method of training for intercultural competence has emerged as clearly dominant, significant progress has been made in both explaining the psychological processes involved with cultural learning and in designing effective intercultural instruction (Landis, Bennett, & Bennett, 2004).

Anthropologist Edward T. Hall is often credited as the first intercultural communication researcher and for providing basic definitions of culture and cultural values that underlie contemporary research on intercultural learning (Hall, 1959). Unfortunately, early models of intercultural learning and teaching tended to take a relatively static view of culture focusing primarily on “facts” and simple behavior adjustments. Coinciding with more rigorous study of intercultural learning and development, a more nuanced view emerged that recognized the dynamic nature of culture in society, one of constant change, and of human creation (Landis, et al., 2004). What is learned during intercultural development generally falls into three broad categories. The first is **knowledge** which includes the standard declarative and procedural representations necessary for human cognitive learning, and basic, culturally-related classification skills. Some examples are basic facts about a new culture, such as common values and beliefs, preferences for physical contact, and typical eating and drinking patterns. The second category is **behavior**. This covers skills such as interpersonal communication, problem solving, coping, and so on, in cultural contexts. Finally, **attitude** involves the learner’s subjective views of other cultures and people from them. A positive, neutral, or negative disposition towards a different culture can
profundely influence one’s ability to learn about it and progress to the more advanced stages of intercultural
development.

Models of intercultural development and learning generally assume that learning occurs in stages and can take
many years. Empirical evidence provides strong support for this assumption. Whether it be a student
studying abroad, or a business executive starting a new branch in a foreign country, the assumption that
people acclimate gradually is both intuitive and generally supported by psychometric and cognitive measures
of intercultural development (Landis, et al., 2004). A variety of models have been proposed to explain how
people acquire intercultural knowledge and skills as well as how development occurs in stages over time.

One of the more mature theories of intercultural learning is Milton Bennett’s (1993) Developmental Model of
Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). The DMIS rests on the assertion that as one’s ability to construe cultural
differences evolves, intercultural competence also increases. According to Bennett, “it is the construction of
reality as increasingly capable of accommodating cultural difference that constitutes development” (Bennett,
1993, p. 24). The DMIS posits that people assume one of two worldview orientations: ethnocentrism and
ethnorelativism. Specifically, these refer the positioning of one’s own culture in relation to others. An
ethnocentric orientation implies that one perceives all other cultures relative to his or her own (i.e., that it is
central to reality), whereas an ethnorelative perspective implies that one’s own culture is understood in the
context of others. Intercultural learning can be understood as movement from an ethnocentric orientation to
an ethnorelative one. Bennett describes three sub-stages within each orientation that describe common
cognitive and affective states that arise during development. The first ethnocentric stage is denial of difference in
which the learner ignores or neglects differences. The next stage is defense against difference which includes
recognition of cultural difference, but with negative evaluation. This stage is characterized by an “us vs.
them” mindset and overt, negative stereotyping. The last ethnocentric stage is minimization of difference and
includes the first signs of recognizing another cultural worldview. In this stage, the learner emphasizes
similarities between cultures and recognizes only superficial cultural differences. Comments such as “we are
all the same” are common at this stage. Guidance is especially important because some learners believe
minimization is the ultimate stage of growth. When reality sets in that cultural differences are truly significant,
there is a risk of withdrawal (Bennett, 1993, p. 44). The shift to an ethnorelative orientation is characterized
by a basic understanding that one’s culture is but one out of many valid worldviews. It begins with the stage
of acceptance of difference where the learner recognizes and appreciates cultural differences and responds with
positive feelings, such as curiosity. In the next stage, adaptation to difference, the learner makes an asserted effort
to take the perspective of others. Because of this new perspective-taking or “frame shifting” ability, the
learner can more easily interact with people from other cultures. The final stage is integration of difference: the
learner has internalized multiple cultural worldviews and can easily assume different perspectives. Integration
is an advanced stage often requiring years of experience to achieve. In the context of the DMIS, the goal of
intercultural training is to promote gradual movement through the stages and deliver appropriate training
given the learner’s progress. If, for example, behavioral change is rushed, the learner may develop an
impoverished understanding of the new culture. As with learning in most domains, it is important to prevent
shallow learning and to cultivate deep conceptual understanding.

Bennett’s model is general, empirically grounded, and has produced a number of validated psychometric
measures for assessment (Landis, et al., 2004, pp. 85-128). However, a number of formulations of
acculturation and intercultural learning also exist that are based on different theoretical foundations and serve
different purposes. One example is the ABC Model of Cultural Contact which focuses on development when
one is immersed (physically) in a new culture (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). It integrates cultural
learning (cognitive and behavioral), stress and adaptation, and social identity theory to explain how
intercultural learning and growth occurs. Stress and adaption theory is considered because of the often
stressful nature of learning about a new culture and the emotions that are typically encountered: learners
naturally adopt coping strategies to handle cultural differences, feelings of superiority or inadequacy, and
anger or feelings of loss. The theory suggests that the stress can be minimized through adaptive responses. Social identity theory provides a foundation for supporting learners in maintaining self-esteem given the new social groups in which they find themselves, and the natural biases they may encounter. In sum, Ward et al. (2001) seek to provide a comprehensive theory of acculturation and apply it to improve the effectiveness of intercultural training programs.

Finally, although researchers often decouple intercultural learning from language learning, compelling reasons exist to consider them together (Paige, Jorstad, Siaya, Klein, & Colby, 2000). Many of the features of spoken language, the way different languages enable achievement of communicative goals, and the history behind their evolution often relate closely to – or can be explained by – underlying cultural beliefs, values, and customs. Indeed, differences in spoken language represents a very noticeable difference for visitors to foreign cultures, and thus it is no surprise that language competence has the potential to dramatically ease intercultural learning by enabling more effective communication, question asking and answering, and so on. In addition, significant attention is paid by language education researchers to the differences between classroom learning and learning a language via immersion, and how this relates to intercultural learning. The fundamental idea of “context as culture” suggests that classroom-based instruction should seek to recreate cultural contexts for language learning (Paige, et al., 2000). Given the increasing connectedness of the world, acquisition of language skills along with the general cognitive and metacognitive processes involved with intercultural competence will remain an important research topic for the foreseeable future.

Important Scientific Research and Open Questions

Although specific models have proven useful to both explain intercultural learning and design effective intercultural training programs for certain contexts, significant open questions remain. For example, there is no general agreement on whether any existing theoretical model of intercultural learning is “sufficiently complex to capture all of the critical variables” nor on how best to measure learning in a cultural context (Landis, et al., 2004, p. 453). A recent meta-analytic review suggests that many training programs have been found to be effective at teaching cultural knowledge and generating learner satisfaction, but generally fall short in skill acquisition and attitude change. A possible explanation lies in the lack of strong, experiential components in the reviewed training programs – lectures, assimilators, discussion, and role-play are indicated as the top four types of programs (Landis, et al., 2004, pp. 129-144). To address this shortcoming, a rapidly growing area of interest lies in the use of virtual learning environments and the use of virtual humans for cultural learning. Here, key open questions revolve around the validity and fidelity of such environments, both in terms of the computational models that drive interactions, as well as their pedagogical design and integration into existing intercultural instruction (Ogan & Lane, in press).

Cross-References

→ Adaptation and learning
→ Anthropology of learning and cognitions
→ Cognitive flexibility
→ Communication and learning
→ Cross-cultural factors in learning and motivation
→ Cross-cultural learning styles
→ Culture on second language learning
→ Emotions and learning
References


