

DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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Abstract

Globalization, understood as a process that has reduced the barriers that separate local contexts from international contexts, has increased and accelerated the economic, cultural, and political interactions among countries, organizations, and citizens (Giddens, 2000). From the business side, firms are increasingly involved in foreign ventures such as outsourcing, off-shoring, exporting, importing and investing in foreign countries that require the correct adaptation of managers to cultural differences. In fact, the inability of managers to face the cultural challenges of doing business abroad is one of the causes of business failures (Johnson, Lenartowicz, & Apud 2006; Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991). Rather than a lack of ability in the technical aspects of their job, a major factor in business failures (e.g., early return of an expatriate, poor choice of an export market, or problems running a foreign

acquisition) is the inability of managers to understand non-native cultures and to interact effectively with their counterparts overseas (Johnson *et al.*, 2006). Working, studying, and living with people from different cultures, is difficult for individuals because cultural barriers can cause misunderstandings that detract from effective interactions (Adler, 2008). As a result, students, employees, and citizens have to find effective ways to deal with increased differences in lifestyles, attitudes, values, and behaviors in communities as well as in the work place (Jackson & Alvarez, 1992). All these changes have made intercultural competence emerge as a crucial factor not only for business success but also for living pleasantly and respectfully with people from different cultures.

An individual is competent when he or she has a collection of knowledge, attitudes, and skills that leads to behaviors that meet the performance demands in a given job, role, or function (Boyatzis 1982). An interculturally competent person has an understanding of cultural communication differences, an ability to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds, and a desire to use the knowledge and abilities (Bennett 1986; Chen & Starosta 2000). Thus, intercultural competence is an individual's repertoire of skills, knowledge, and attitudes, needed to interact effectively and appropriately in culturally diverse settings encountered at home or abroad (Bennett 1986; Graf & Harland, 2005; Johnson *et al.*, 2006).

Public and private organizations from all over the world are demanding that universities place increased emphasis on intercultural education. Many universities include in their mission statements the goal of having globally competent graduates; however, few universities have clearly defined what this term means or how they will know when they have achieved this goal (ACE, 2007). The measures of effectiveness of internationalization initiatives such as study-abroad programs have been changing from the level of activity to competency-based education that stresses learning outcomes (Fantini 2006; AACSB, 2007; Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, & Paige 2009). For educators, this new emphasis implies more attention to the evaluation of what students are learning, the skills they are developing, and how these skills translate into knowledge needed for jobs and for life (Williams, 2005). In international education, a study-abroad program, which is one key activity designed to have more interculturally competent graduates, should be evaluated not only in terms of participation (number of students going abroad) but also in terms of learning objectives.

Although there are a good number of anecdotal and qualitative reports, there is a lack of quantitative and systematic evidence of the effectiveness of study-abroad programs on the student's development (Williams 2005; ACE 2007). Some studies have demonstrated the positive impact of study-abroad programs; however, just a few (e.g. Williams, 2005; Angulo, 2008; Paige, Cohen, & Shively, 2004; Vande Berg et. al. 2009) have employed pre–post designs and have used control groups to test their hypotheses. It is also important to evaluate how students' individual differences and environmental variables influence the outcomes of studying abroad. My objective with this research is to assess the impact that studying abroad has on developing intercultural competence in undergraduate students, and how variables such as the student's personality (who the student is), and the degree of intercultural interactions during the study abroad program (what the student does) influence the change in intercultural competence. The study will focus on university-level academic exchange programs that last one semester. For the sample, this research will have students from three business schools in Colombia and one in the United States. Clarke, Wright, & McMillen (2009) consider that contrasting the changes of intercultural development of students from different cultures could allow for the better understanding of how intercultural proficiency is developed. Having students from two countries that differ greatly in Hofstede's cultural dimensions (e.g., in individualism Colombia scores 83 whereas the United States scores 16; in uncertainty avoidance, Colombia scores 80, whereas, the United States scores 43), may establish if the findings of this research moves beyond cultural specificity.

Theoretical Development and Hypotheses

A study-abroad program extends the classroom beyond the conventional campus setting to include international encounters with other people and cultures, developing a learning process through experience. Intercultural transformation theory (Kim, 1993) is useful to explain the growth process that a student experiences during intercultural encounters. According to this theory, in the sojourner acts a self-reflexive system that observes and renews as it continuously interacts with the environment. When external factors or stimulus do not match what is expected, the individual's equilibrium is disturbed, resulting in stress that pushes the individual to develop adaptive measures in order to regain the equilibrium. Bennet's (1986) Developmental Model of

Intercultural Sensitivity, states that as the individual's experience of cultural differences becomes more complex (e.g., studying and living in a different culture), the individual's potential competence in intercultural interactions increases. My argument is that the experience gained for the students in a study-abroad program through contacts with other cultures and the maturation caused by the adjustment to differences in the host country is a key factor to develop intercultural competence. Therefore,

H1: Students who participate in a study abroad program increase their level of intercultural competence more than students who do not participate in a study abroad program.

Openness to experience, describes a dimension of personality that distinguishes imaginative, creative people from down-to-earth, conventional people. On average, people high in openness are intellectually curious, appreciative of art, open to emotion, and willing to try new things (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Ang, Van Dyne, & Koh (2005) consider that openness to experience is a crucial personality factor that is significantly related to a person's capability to function effectively when interacting with those who have different cultural backgrounds. Along the same line, Ones & Viswesvaran (1997) reasoned that openness to experience is a particularly good predictor of expatriate success in overseas assignments because those with high openness to experience are inherently curious. Recently, Burke, Watkins & Guzman (2009) found that openness to experience was predictive of the success of international students in the dimensions of interest in local culture, adjustment, flexibility, and cultural empathy. My argument is that the development in intercultural competence that results from studying abroad is positively moderated by the student's level of openness to experience. Thus,

H2: Openness to experience will moderate the relationship between participation in a study-abroad program and level of intercultural competence such that students with higher level in openness to experience obtain more progress in intercultural competence compared to students with lower levels of openness to experience.

Based on the type of programs and living arrangements (e.g., host family, student dormitory, private room), personality factors, as well as language familiarity, students who study overseas have various degrees of contact with host and international people inside and outside the classroom. The

mere participation in a SAP is not a sufficient condition to improve cultural awareness and sensitivity (AEI, 1998). Vande Berg *et al.* (2009) found that the intercultural development scores of students abroad who reported spending more time with members of their host families or host nationals increased more than those who spent less time. According to the authors, American students who spent much of their free time with other U.S. nationals were intercultural under-challenged and may become more ethnocentric while abroad. Intercultural interactions refer to students' contacts through academic and nonacademic activities with either internationals or nationals from the host country. My argument is that the more intercultural interactions a student has, the greater the changes in his or her intercultural competence. Thus,

H3: For students who study abroad, their increase in intercultural competence will be positively related to their level of intercultural interactions.

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