

## DEVELOPING REFLECTIVE AND CREATIVE SKILLS IN THE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION CLASS

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*Abstract: This article aims to argue in favour of the inclusion of reflective and creative skills in the Intercultural Communication class. Starting from definitions of intercultural competence, it suggests that the limited number of hours assigned for such courses in programmes that are not specifically tailored for Cultural Studies makes it difficult to cover the "knowledge" component of intercultural competence. Instead, efficiency in teaching could result from developing students' "attitude component" – starting from the awareness of (potential) ethnocentrism and going beyond it, to the acceptance of and openness towards difference. This can be accomplished by developing students' reflective and creative skills. The article provides one example from the author's teaching practice.*

*Keywords: reflective, creative, skills, intercultural, communication.*

### **Introduction**

Globalization comes with contents and discontents, with advantages and shortcomings, with needs and benefits. It is a commonplace to talk about the globalization of businesses, finance, services, about the internationalization of education or large scale movements of populations, fleeing zones of conflict or looking for better opportunities in the richer "North". In this context of multiplying contacts between peoples originally from somewhere else, the need for intercultural training becomes increasingly obvious, as a way to fend off cultural apprehension, conflict, or shock.

Teaching Intercultural Communication poses multiple challenges to instructors, which range from assessing students' learning needs, finding the appropriate mix of teaching methods and materials, to the most relevant means to carry out evaluation. Contextual factors are instrumental in the selection or design of the tools that will lead to learning: class-room facilities, students' computer literacy, teacher's computer literacy, the amount of time dedicated to the course, the number of students in the class, their previous experience of the world, and so on. The complexity and fluidity of the subject itself sets limits to what the instructor can do.

The expected learning outcome of the Intercultural Communication class is the development of intercultural competence. In this article, I argue in favour of the inclusion of reflective and creative skills in the Intercultural Communication class, in order to develop students' awareness of their (potential) ethnocentrism and help them overcome it, to help them be open towards difference and accept it. Also, I include a practical example of activities that involve critical thinking and creativity.

### **I. Intercultural competence: definition and assessment**

Intercultural competence is a broad term, of multiple definitions, ranging from simple ones, such as the one provided by James W. Neuliep ("the degree to which you effectively adapt your verbal and nonverbal messages to the appropriate cultural context" (Neuliep 2011: 424)), to very elaborate ones, as we can find in Michael

Byram's work (the five "savoirs" or components of intercultural competence: discovery and interaction, knowledge, education, intercultural attitudes, interpreting and relating) (Byram 1997).

In a comprehensive study titled "Identification and Assessment of Intercultural Competence as a Student Outcome of Internationalization", Darla K. Deardorff tackles the lack of specificity in definitions of intercultural competence which, in turn, leads to confusion over the appropriate way of assessing it. For more than forty years now, scholars have come up with various definitions of intercultural competence. Deardorff's article, from 2006, reports on the results of an ample research among US institutional administrators of internationalization strategies, and of applying the Delphi technique, to develop consensus among various scholars, tackling the components of international competence and ways of assessing it.

The twenty two items that registered between 80 % and 100 % among top intercultural scholars were: "understanding others' worldviews", "cultural self-awareness and capacity for self-assessment", "adaptability and adjustment to new cultural environment", "skills to listen and observe", "general openness toward intercultural learning and to people from other cultures", "ability to adapt to varying intercultural communication and learning styles", "flexibility", "skills to analyze, interpret and relate", "tolerating and engaging ambiguity", "deep knowledge and understanding of culture (one's own and others)", "respect for other cultures", "cross-cultural empathy", "understanding the value of cultural diversity", "understanding of role and impact of culture and the impact situational, social, and historical contexts involved", "cognitive flexibility – ability to switch frames from etic to emic and back again", "sociolinguistic competence (awareness of relation between language and meaning in societal context)", "mindfulness", "withholding judgment", "curiosity and discovery", "learning through interaction", "ethnorelative view", "culture-specific knowledge and understanding host-culture's traditions" (Deardorff 2006: 249-250).

In her PhD dissertation from 2004, Deardorff had come up with two visual representations of intercultural competence: a pyramid model, whose basis is represented by "requisite attitudes": respect (valuing other cultures, cultural diversity), openness (to intercultural learning and to people from other cultures, withholding judgment), curiosity and discovery (tolerating ambiguity and uncertainty) (Deardorff 2006: 254), and a cyclic, process model of intercultural competence, whose entry-point is at individual level (attitudes), going through "knowledge and comprehension (cultural self-awareness, deep cultural knowledge, sociolinguistic awareness)", with the internal outcome of "informed frame of reference shift (adaptability, flexibility, ethnorelative view, empathy), going through interaction to the external outcome of "effective and appropriate communication & behavior in an intercultural situation", that loops back on attitudes (Deardorff 2006: 256).

### **Critical Thinking and Creativity in the Intercultural Communication Class**

Critical thinking is a concept that derives from Dewey's notion of "reflective thinking", defined as active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends (Dewey 1910: 6; 1933: 9, apud <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/critical-thinking/>). In higher education, the development of critical thinking features high among the desiderata of learning/training programmes, as part of the development of autonomous students, who would learn how to learn, remain curious and selective in internalising knowledge, from the multiple sources available.

Creativity, on the other hand, has enjoyed a long conceptual trajectory, being used in psychology, literary studies, arts, media studies, business, and so on. For the purpose of this article, I shall focus on a simple definition by Robert E. Franken who, in his book *Human Motivation*, described creativity as the “tendency to generate or recognize ideas, alternatives, or possibilities that may be useful in solving problems, communicating with others, and entertaining ourselves and others” (Franken 1994: 396).

The challenge that I have faced my students with was to integrate both critical thinking and creativity in the Intercultural Communication class, as a way to invite them to reflect on the Romanian culture, to distance themselves from it, if necessary, or to embrace it in a way that would strengthen their sense of cultural security. At the same time, I was trying to engage them in activities that would encourage them to communicate in small groups, and to enjoy the process of reflection.

Group activities are likely to foster feelings of security. And, as John W. Berry argues, “when people feel secure in their own identity, they will be in a position to accept those who differ from them (i.e., when there is no threat to their culture and identity, they are able to accept ‘others’)” (Berry 2014: 233). This disposition of acceptance towards difference is, in fact, the essential element of “attitude” that grounds any development of intercultural competence. It is also the foundation of multiculturalism – the only model, in the author’s view, which is beneficial for both the *larger society* and *ethnocultural groups* that are incorporated in the former, and whose interests and needs are accommodated by it, as well (ibid. 226).

Literature on reflective skills reports good results of their use in intercultural service learning, as a way to develop civic engagement and civic responsibility. Urraca *et al.*, however, point out that “reflection does not come naturally; it needs to be nurtured and encouraged” (Urraca *et al.* 2009: 288). An example of how reflection is stimulated and practised in an institutional setting is provided by Biagi *et al* in their article titled “Instilling Reflective Intercultural Competence in Education Abroad Experiences in Italy: The FICCS Approach + Reflective Education”.

In the International Center for Intercultural Exchange from Siena, reflection is practiced in the form of writing. Biagi *et al.* argue that reflective writing “is a practice that is strongly tied to the concept of acquisition and of thought. One reflects to learn something, or rather one learns thanks to reflection. Learning therefore is conceived as an activity that integrates the cognitive process with the emotional process. Reflective writing is an expression ... of the mental process of reflection” (Biagi *et al.* 2012: 29). In the experience of the Center, reflective writing is the instrument through which instructors could monitor a student’s intercultural competence development and the transition from ethnocentrism to ethno-relativism. Also, the authors found that reflective writing is instrumental in managing emotions, apprehension, stress or shock in intercultural encounters. By sharing their written reflections – with fellow students or with instructors – , by comparing their emotions to those of others, or by the simple act of sharing them with the instructor, they fend off some of their emotional burden, and evaluate their own intercultural growth (Biagi *et al.* 2012: 30-31).

In my teaching practice, however, I mostly deal with Romanian students, for whom Intercultural Communication is not necessarily offered as training prior to a specific post abroad, nor as part of service learning, but as part of MA programmes that aim to develop a global mindset. This broad objective explains why aspects such as specific “cultural knowledge” and “cultural behaviour” are less emphasised, the focus being laid, rather, on cultural dimensions, potential sources of conflict or misinterpretation, cultural stereotypes, verbal and non-verbal codes.

Critical thinking can be instrumental in the teaching of Intercultural Communication in that it invites students to distance themselves from an emic perspective and to approach reality from an etic perspective. Exposing students to the term “critical thinking” can, however, backfire, because this particular wording can lead them to becoming overtly self-critical, by confusing critical thinking with (self-)criticism.

One way to combine critical thinking and creativity is the use of metaphors. Theoretical models of culture abound in metaphors: the iceberg model, credited to Edward T. Hall, Edgar Schein’s onion model, used with reference to organizational culture, definitions of culture as “software of the mind” (Hofstede), or a screen (Edward T. Hall), notions such as cultural shock (Oberg), melting pot or salad bowl, the peach vs coconut dichotomy, and so on. I have found that the peach vs coconut dichotomy can be very engaging for students, as a springboard for other activities.

Introduced by Kurt Lewin and popularised by Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner in their co-authored book *Riding the Waves of Culture*, the peach vs coconut dichotomy argues that there are certain national cultures (“peaches”) whose members are more open to sharing personal information; they are easy going and easy to befriend. However, there is a point beyond the level of pleasantries, that cannot be overcome. On the other hand, the so-called “coconut” cultures comprise individuals who do not share much personal information, who seem distant and cold. Yet, once one befriends them, their “soft” side is revealed. Trompenaar’s classical example is that of the Americans, as “peaches,” and of Germans, as “coconuts”.

Starting from this dichotomy, I asked my students to work in small groups (not more than six students) and come up with a metaphor that would capture “essential” features of the Romanian culture. Some of them thought of fruit, too, and compared Romanians to strawberries because they are “so beautiful on the outside and have a sweet and ‘tasty’ soul”. On the other hand, other students were highly critical in justifying their “plum” metaphor, by writing that they chose plums because they are “full of alcohol in the inside, and just the inside matters!”. Still in the realm of fruit metaphors, some students argued that Romanian culture is like a pomegranate because “it’s hard to open, but once you get it open, there’s a ton of elements left to discover”.

The idea of variety comes in other metaphors as well, where it is accompanied by moral judgments. A mini-group argued that Romanians are like a box of chocolate, in which some pieces are tasty and others “gross”, “some are in a beautiful package and some are not, and in general this shows the diversity and variety of people of this nation”. An even more critical view than this, or than the “plum” metaphor, came from another group whose cultural metaphor for Romanians was that of a parrot, because “we speak a lot and we do nothing. [We] also copy other cultures. In [the] political context, we promise a lot but we forget to respect our promises.”

Out of the vegetal and animal realm, the suggested metaphors were even more elaborate. Thus, for one group, Romanians are like weather, because “our nation is very flexible and has the ability to adapt to everything, no matter what, we can find a solution to all problems we have. The weather can also be a bad aspect because sometimes it creates disasters for others or for ourselves”. Another group described, more or less, a coconut, but by reversing the degrees of thickness and hardness. For them, Romanians “are like the gaseous planets, from other solar systems. They are very hard to understand and you must go through a lot of aspects until you can finally arrive on a rocky surface like the core of those planets. But until you can get there you must travel through a lot of low density space. The very high gravity from the core of a gaseous planet represents the bond that you will have with them.”

Students shared their views in the entire class, and felt proud to explain their metaphors to the other mini-groups. The sense of owning their ideas and of defending them in front of others boosted their self-confidence and taught them also to relativize their own views, when confronting them with the views of others in the class. The exercise engaged them in thinking both critically and creatively, in an entertaining manner that conveyed to them the feeling that they were not doing just a class assignment, but something valid and valuable for themselves, as individuals and as members of a (cultural) group.

As for myself, as facilitator, observer and evaluator, it was rewarding to see that everybody wanted to contribute and was willing to negotiate their ideas, until consensus was reached at the level of the small group, and that they really enjoyed describing or analysing aspects of Romanian culture via metaphors that they then had to explain.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, I have pleaded for the inclusion of activities that develop students' reflective and creative abilities in the Intercultural Communication class. In terms of direct learning outcomes, the combination is set to contribute towards the development of such elements of intercultural competence, from Dr Deardorff's 2006 list, as "cultural self-awareness and capacity for self-assessment", "skills to analyze, interpret and relate", "deep knowledge and understanding of culture (one's own and others)", "cognitive flexibility – ability to switch frames from etic to emic and back again", "curiosity and discovery", "learning through interaction", and "ethnorelative view". They pertain to the broader "attitude" aspect of intercultural competence, that undergirds any potential intercultural learning.

The practical activity described, in my opinion, is in line with Deardorff, de Wit and Heyl's emphasis on skill development, as a feature of the current trends in international higher education, and on students, as drivers of educational agendas (2012: 462-463). What we can do, as educators, is to allow students to be autonomous, to encourage them to think (critically) about the world around them, and engage reality creatively.

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This work was supported by a mobility grant of the Romanian Ministry of Research and Innovation, CNCS – UEFISCDI, project number PN-III-P1-1.1-MC-2018-2955, within PNCDI III