

Intercultural Learning and Non-Formal Education

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Abstract: The modern world of globalization offers a vast field for bringing cultures together and making the previous distances disappear. Nowadays, people with different cultural backgrounds share the same neighborhood. The question is whether people representing different cultures live next to each other hating the others and the diversity or whether they appreciate the value of intercultural society; whether the interaction between the two presupposes an inevitable clash or it is rather a process leading to harmony; whether different cultures can coexist based on mutual acceptance or respect; whether there are some processes to go through and whether there are certain difficulties to cope with.

The paper introduces the dimension of cultures, the possible fusions and clashes among the societies or individuals representing different cultural backgrounds and sharing different mindsets on reality. It targets the question of how to deal with difference; how to build trust and tolerance between the representatives of an oriental culture with that of western; how to have a Christian live next to a Muslim? How can we valorize those cultures and learn throughout the process?

Speaking of learning in intercultural communication, the paper underlines the key competences that should be developed in the “*citizen of the world*”. When doing so, we introduce alternative approaches to the process of information acquisition, sharing, and breaking the barricades – non-formal education tools found in the paper tend to bring *interculturality* to the level of consciousness and develop the sense of “*devouring diversity*” from a more practical point of view.

Keywords: culture, culturology, dimensions of culture, intercultural communication, interculturality, non-formal education.

Introduction

As one of the founders of the contemporary disciplines on the study of culture – Edward Tylor states: “...culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, 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” (Haas, 1944). The statement claims that everything directly or indirectly related to the mankind, anything created or maintained is subjected to cultural influence. Does this mean that to be able to understand a person, to effectively communicate and to build proper relationships, one needs to master the cultural specifics of each and every individual? What is the relation of the individual to the nation? Is the culture necessarily brought down to nations and ethnicities or is this a concept which extends beyond demographic dimensions?

The hypothesis we are putting before ourselves are the following:

- Should interculturality be analyzed as a separate discipline in the learning agenda;
- What is the effectiveness of non-formal education? Is it an alternative to formal education or a separate distinguished methodology kit that can be applied for particular needs.

The work tends to serve the needs of the modern multinational society in terms of elaborating on what makes up an “interculturally competent” individual; what it takes to understand a person, to avoid or to tackle intrapersonal, interpersonal and intergroup clashes of cultural coloring. It furtherly dwells upon how those competencies should be developed in a classroom and a non-classroom atmosphere.

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Speaking of learning in intercultural communication, the paper proposes an alternative viewpoint on developing the intercultural competences and intercultural sensitivity – non-formal education. The particular attention on the non-formal methodology block is justified by the fact that non-formal education gains more and more worldwide prioritization as an effective tool-kit which manages to best combine the usefulness with entertaining process. Already today and even more tomorrow, it is no longer sufficient to think only in terms of formal education. It is therefore necessary to widen our understanding of education, making life-long learning a

reality. People continuously seek for alternative means of education; systems that would prove to be effective and goal-oriented and that would best satisfy human curiosity.

The practical value of the work consists in the fact that the two interrelated areas that are taken under observation – the concept of interculturality and intercultural society and the development of intercultural competence through non-formal education, are underobserved and underapplied in Armenia. Being a vastly homogeneous monoethnic country, Armenia lack intercultural communication skills which makes it much harder to interact with the international visitors, to adopt tolerance and respect towards diversity and to be able to best get assimilated into a new cultural environment when shifting to a new country for a long- or short-term stay. Secondly, despite the educational reforms and innovations that are continuously being advocated in Armenia and despite the fact of her joining several reforms of the European Commission including the “White Paper on Youth”, the non-formal education is not only underapplied but also underestimated and not recognized. That’s why the work draws parallels between formal and non-formal education trying to differentiate the ideology and implementation peculiarities that lie under each of them.

Method of the Study

The chain the work follows is based on the principle of “general-specific-practical continuum”: The study was mainly carried out in two phases. The first phase was to find out what are the tendencies for intercultural learning in the world, what is perceived by saying diversity at present, and how it is viewed in terms of learning and comprehension. The second phase, which derived primarily from the discovered need for new approaches to intercultural learning, was carried out through theoretical research on the main concepts and strategy frameworks. Finally, the paper was concluded with the classification of non-formal educational tools and the introduction of specific methods for stimulating intercultural learning. Apart from introducing different concepts and theories, it goes on proposing definite practical tools on intercultural learning. The icebreakers, energizers, role plays, and simulation games aim to give the non-formal education practitioner a vast diversity of tools that can be adopted according to the specific aim, atmosphere and audience characteristics.

Stages of Intercultural Learning

One of the first models on intercultural learning stages was suggested by Milton J. Bennett who viewed intercultural learning as a process of evolving the intercultural sensitivity. Bennett predicted the close link between the personal development and intercultural sensitivity and claimed that the development of cultural sensitivity should be an inseparable part of intercultural learning to reach effective communication process; his developmental model deals with the continuum of increasing sophistication in dealing with cultural difference, starting with ethnocentrism and decreasing to the recognition and acceptance of difference. He calls this stage as ethnorelativism. The main underlying concept of Bennett’s model is what he calls “differentiation” (Bennett, 1993), and how one develops the ability to recognize and live with difference. Differentiation can be interpreted in two ways: firstly, it refers to reality when people look at one and the same thing differently; secondly, it refers to the fact that cultures differ from one another in the way they maintain patterns of differentiation.; in other words, it refers to how people interpret the world around them. Therefore, intercultural sensitivity aims at developing the capacity in every individual to perceive the fact that people see things differently and respect the different worldviews.

Ethnocentrism and Ethnorelativism as Stages for Intercultural Awareness

As defined by Bennett, ethnocentrism is the stage when the person assumes his worldview being the only possible and the only right one. The most characteristic thing for ethnocentrism is *denial*: this is the stage when the person simply denies the existence of other worldviews. Denial leads either to *isolation* when the person cuts himself off the surrounding not to encounter the reality of difference; or to *separation* when the person intentionally puts the difference far away. However, we should note that separation is a stage up from isolation since in this case the person at least recognizes the difference (but of course, he does not accept it).

The second stage identified by Bennett is *defense*: this is the process when the individual perceives difference as a threat since it offers an alternative to his form of reality. The attitude that is most probably to be adopted is *denigration* when the different worldview is perceived negatively and is strongly criticized. The other implication of defense is *superiority*, i.e. when the person considers his worldview as being superior and pays practically no attention on the other coexisting worldviews. Bennett also considers the opposite reaction – the so-called “*reversal*”, when the person perceives the other culture as superior and undervalues his own one.

The last stage of ethnocentrism identified by Bennett is *minimization*, i.e. when the other culture is clearly recognized, yet an attempt is made to minimize or overlook its meaning.

The key idea for ethnorelativism is the assumption that cultures can only be understood relative to one another and that particular behavior can be understood within a cultural context only. The first stage for ethnocentrism is *acceptance*; this is the stage when the person comes to accept the verbal and non-verbal difference behavior variations within cultures and to realize that those differences deserve respect. This ultimately leads to the recognition of values and the variations within those values that strongly predetermine the worldview and behavioral conduct.

The following stage towards cultural sensitivity is *adaptation*; this is the reverse process for acceptance, i.e. when the person gives up his own values and norms to accept those of the other /dominant/ culture. This might ultimately lead to the loss of identity. Central to adaptation is *empathy* – the attempt to think of a particular thing or situation through the prism of the other culture only with no reference to his own one. Empathy might later enlarge to *pluralism*, i.e. looking at things through multiple cultural frames.

The final stage as identified by Bennett is *integration*, when an attempt is made to integrate different frames into one. This might ultimately lead to the development of a person with no cultural identity, i.e. as someone being an integrated outsider. The first stage to integration is the contextual analysis of the situation through multiple cultural backgrounds. One thing to be made clear is that this final stage is identified by Bennett as an “arrival point” not a final one. What Bennett’s model tries to prove is that intercultural learning is a process that is described by continuous advancement (with the possibility to move back and forth in the process), and that it is possible to measure the person’s intercultural awareness according to his degree of intercultural sensitivity.

Summing up, we should say that Bennett’s model proves how complex the process of intercultural learning is: starting with cultural identity and the realization of the identity to the recognition of the other worldviews and ultimately to their integration for better understanding the differences emerging on day-to-day basis. Finally, one of the key messages brought forth by Bennett is that although intercultural learning is analyzed on the individual level, it ultimately suggests the capacity to leave peacefully in a diverse environment.

Intercultural Competence

Regardless of the actual communication being of global or international character, intercultural communication principles remain the key guiding the process of exchanging meaningful and unambiguous information across cultural boundaries, in a way that preserves mutual respect and minimizes antagonism. These principles may have equal relevance when a tourist seeks help or when a politician advocates world peace. Intercultural principles concentrate on openness to the other, active respect for difference, mutual comprehension, active tolerance, validating the cultures present, providing equality of opportunities, fighting discrimination. Communication between different cultural identities can appear paradoxical in the sense that it requires recognition of the other both as similar and as different. In this context, according to Ouellet (Oullet, 1991), intercultural education can be designed to promote and to develop:

- a better comprehension of cultures in modern societies;
- a larger capacity of communication between people from different cultures;
- a more flexible attitude to the context of cultural diversity in society;
- a better capacity of participation in social interaction, and the recognition of the common heritage of humanity.

As stated by different scholars /Brislin, Yoshida, Pedersen, Tong-Toomey/, the goal of intercultural learning is to prepare people for more effective interpersonal relations when they interact with individuals from different cultures other than their own; in other words, it is about facilitating effective communication. As we will later on touch upon the idea, most of the scholars identify the need for the intercultural communication and learning being organized in the way to ensure the process itself is enjoyable and interactive.

Advancing with the main competences identified as important for intercultural communication, especially that in an educational environment, we should bring them down as follows:

- observing, identifying and recognizing;
- comparing and contrasting;
- negotiating meaning;
- dealing with or tolerating ambiguity;
- effectively interpreting messages;
- limiting the possibility of misinterpretation;
- defending one's own point of view while acknowledging the legitimacy of others;
- accepting difference.

Interculturally competent are the students who possess the above identified capacities that can be classified under *knowledge (cognition), attitudes (emotions) and skills (behavior)* and who are able to:

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- look at their own culture from the point of view of their own culture (i.e. have a good understanding and awareness of their own culture);
- be aware of how their culture is seen from outside, by other countries or cultures;
- understand or see the target culture from its own perspective (i.e. understand and be aware of what other people think of their own culture);
- be aware of how they see the target culture.

In other words, intercultural learning is a bilateral process; you observe the target culture and get to understand your own one in between. The better perception of one's own culture will undoubtedly contribute to the better understanding of the other cultures, recognizing and accepting the difference, and living in diversity with tolerance and open for new information with every step one makes with a representative of another culture. Above all, despite the fact that there is not an educational discipline as intercultural learning, there are keys that aim at guiding the process of acquisition of proper skills, among them:

Confidence and Respect:

Building up confidence is a cornerstone of intercultural learning; it is a prerequisite that we feel comfortable to share different viewpoints, perceptions and feelings, to arrive at acceptance and understanding. It requires a lot of patience and sensitivity in order to create such a learning atmosphere which enables us to listen to each other as equals, to empower each individual's self-confidence. This means that we need to give space to everybody's expression; to value all experiences, talents and contributions; our various needs and expectations. When the big part of what we might share is about values, norms and strong basic assumptions, we will need a lot of confidence in the ones we share with. Mutual trust goes hand in hand with mutual respect, honesty in our sharing.

Experiencing Identity:

We, as human beings, have our own cultural identity, which means, our own background and experience; and the learning process is achieved through overcoming the obstacles and the barriers stemming for the culture. We have all a personal reality which has shaped us, and we will continue to live there, enriched with new knowledge and experience. That means, in intercultural learning processes, we have to deal constantly with where we come from, what we have lived and encountered. Trying to understand ourselves, our own identity, is a prerequisite to encounter others.

Constructed Realities:

Nothing is absolute. There are many ways to read and discern reality. Even the representatives of one and the same culture interpret the situations and the circumstances differently; this is true in all its senses: we have seen it both in the verbal and non-verbal communications as well as in basic assumptions such as that of time and space. Consequently, the learning process should be accompanied by some efforts: to respect personal freedom and decision, to accept other views equally and seek the reconciliation of different viewpoints, and to be conscious of our personal responsibility.

In Dialogue with the Other

Intercultural learning places "the other" at the heart of understanding. It starts through dialogue. Oftentimes it is challenging to perceive your own self and the other as being different yet complementing each other. In this understanding, the other becomes indispensable for a new discovery of the self. The process towards such an intercultural sensitivity implies – understood as a process towards the other – to touch and change our very self. Intercultural learning opens up the chance to identify with the perspective of the other, the respectful experience of attempting to "walk in each others' shoes" without pretending to live what the other lives. It can enable us to experience and learn real solidarity, believing in the strength of co-operation. Intercultural learning in this context is as well a way to discover our own capacity for action. And this, again proves the theory of mutuality that we have touched upon in the previous section when speaking of the mutuality of the discovery and learning process in intercultural communication.

Questions and Change

Therefore, we need to accept that there is not always an answer, but remain in constant search, accepting and welcoming change. Reflecting on it, we will need the capacity to question ourselves. Intercultural education places the other at the center of relations. It encourages a continuous questioning of presuppositions, of things we normally take for granted and encourages a constant opening to the unknown and the not understood. In a process of interaction and mutual discovery every human being can fulfill himself or herself – personally, socially and globally. In the intercultural context, the shame is to avoid asking questions rather

than vividly showing that something is new and unknown to the interlocutor; the important thing here is the openness of the latter for new information and perception of the other culture with all its diverse system.

Comprehensive Involvement

Intercultural learning is an experience which involves all senses and levels of learning, knowledge, emotions, behavior in an intensive way. The comprehension of the complexity of this process and all its implications demand a lot from us. Language as element of culture is a central aspect in intercultural communication, and at the same time limited, often a source of misunderstanding. It must thereby not be used as a means of dominance – especially considering different language skills – but can be one tool of communication. All other signs – like body language – have to be equally respected. Since we are fully involved in this kind of learning, we should allow ourselves to be completely part of the processes happening (*see Chapter 2 – *Interculturality* for a more comprehensive information on the cultural coloring of verbal and non-verbal communication).

Potential for Conflict

If we see the variety of perceptions different cultures have of time, space, social and personal relations, etc. it will be very probable to suppose the raise of conflicts or uneasy situations in intercultural communication. Hence, we need to develop conflict management skills, while considering the complexity when dealing with the notion of culture. The key factor here is the belief that diversity is helpful and enriching, and it creates ground for new information and joyful learning. Not every conflict has necessarily a solution, but it certainly needs to be expressed.

Under the Surface

Intercultural learning aims at very deep processes and changes of attitudes and behaviors. It means to deal a good part with the invisible forces and elements of our culture, of our inner self (see: Iceberg Model presented in Chapter 2), many things beneath the “water surface” are unconscious and cannot be expressed clearly. This discovery implies tensions with which we have to deal. It is obviously not easy to accompany people in this process. The most important thing is that we need the courage to go further, to challenge ourselves and others.

A Complex Matter in a Complex World

Trying to summarize the issues pointed out above, it becomes clear that we need very careful and comprehensive approaches allowing a maximum of discernment. Even culture goes beyond national borders and knows many forms and overlapping. Moreover, the cultures themselves are not homogenous; they are comprised of cultures held by community groups or even individuals. Many perspectives have to be met, tensions have to be considered. It is a challenge to any educational approach not to simplify the variety of reasons and implications present, the different values emphasized, the different realities and histories lived. Intercultural learning approaches need to respect these diverse experiences, interpretations and knowledge and adopt diverse methodologies accordingly.

Conclusion

The study has shown that culture is neither a homogeneous unit nor a static, clear-cut phenomenon; it is a complex system of shared values, behavioral conduct, worldview and treatment that guide the human interaction wherever he/she is involved. It is a system characterized by its dimensions and components which come together as a whole shaping the human individuality and its unity with the community; hence, culture is directly communication-relevant. What we have meant by saying communication-relevant is that the whole communication process, starting with initiating a conversation with a particular person on a particular topic to its effective flow and the final conclusion is determined by the condition of how culturally competent the interlocutors are.

The modern world has erased the boundaries between the states and therefore, for any specialist, for any full member of the present-day society, it is far not enough to limit oneself by the genetic cultural competence that is delivered by nature to be able to interact with the “species” of one’s own culture. One should be able to be as sensitive when talking to a Muslim /if we are allowed to generalize it to this largest scale/ as one would be when talking to a Buddhist; and how can a person possibly do so if he/she does not know that the single movement of the thumb denotes completely different concepts in those cultures, let along the perception of time of positioning; One should never be offended when being avoided to look in the eye and vice versa – to be as direct as holding the hand of someone one has known for less than an hour; One should never predict that the

low-context information that would be easily interpretable by his culture would be as easily digested by a person holding another culture; and finally one should never think that to ask “How much do you earn” is as non-provocative as it would be in his culture.

The study helps to identify why in cultures like Armenian it is more common to see isolation and defense towards something that seems, new, different and why people with monoethnic communities have got the perception of superiority towards other cultures. It has shown that the cultural or intercultural adaptation is a long lasting process, and the degree to which the person would shift from the denial of the foreign culture into accepting it depends on how tolerant and interculturally sensitive the person is. This is all that makes up the subject-matter of intercultural learning.

Furtherly, the thesis brought into comparison the different educational settings and drew parallels between the effectiveness of each of them as being structured, half-structured and non-structured. It managed to show that the horizontal relationship between the instructor and the pupil is more effective compared to the vertical relationship when dealing with intercultural learning and capacity development. The diversity of the tools and methodologies offered in the work show that non-formal education, being more dynamic and more adjustable to the specifics and the needs of the particular classroom, offers instructor/trainer/teacher more varieties for being able to reach the learning objective to the most possible extent.

The work furtherly showed that being inclusive and entertaining in character, the non-formal education methodologies are more acceptable in the diverse audience. A person would feel more reluctant to identify himself and his opinion when directly asked the question than when it is done through a simulation game; the education and learning process would be more inclusive when the student himself is part of the process through a simulation game on an unknown culture than when having to read and prepare a report on it; the instructor would more easily break the ease of communication between the newly formed group through an icebreaker on the names and the ability to remember those names than when going through the register and identifying each one's full name separately.

And finally, the study showed that the non-formal learning process is not genuine and perfect in character either; it more difficult to assess in terms of evaluation and in terms of holding the learner accountable for the knowledge he has to acquire.

The non-formal education tools presented in the work are designed primarily for developing the intercultural competence and sensitivity; however, they can be adjusted to other learning needs. The latter can be done in accordance with the peculiarities of the audience, the preference of the participants and the instructor and on the resources available at hand.

The proposed continuation of the work might be the investigation of intercultural learning on an educational policy level to bring it into the school curricula to be applied directly or in-between the other school subjects. The question that should be raised is whether intercultural learning should be investigated mandatorily at school or the outdoor and non-structured activities are enough to meet the basic needs.

The second question that remains unaddressed as relevant for the Armenian reality is the following: what hinders the spread recognition of both of the non-formal education as a methodology skit and of the achievements one can mark in a non-formal structure in Armenia; what are the steps needed for advocating non-formal learning and its recognition on a state level; why the YouthPass and the like still under the shadow as certificates for competence and knowledge.

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