

Cross-cultural Competence in the Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous World

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ABSTRACT – Advances in communication technology and transportation have made the world increasingly seamless and borderless. Globalisation brings people from different cultural backgrounds and regions together in closer contact than ever before. The cross-cultural contact brings its expected problems in cultural differences but the Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous (VUCA) environment also means that people cannot rely on stereotypes and past experiences of other cultural groups because of the speed by which changes take place. Because of this, cross-cultural competence is needed. The dimension that is better understood due to more extensive research is intercultural competence, and cultural training has been found to be useful. The other dimension, cultural intelligence, is less understood. The notion that cultural intelligence depends on individual differences means that some individuals have the intercultural sensitivity that makes for successful cross-cultural contact. Past research conducted in workplace settings suggest that there may be a limit to awareness training. Nevertheless, the investigation of the interrelationship of the intercultural competence and cultural intelligence dimensions is less understood. Furthermore, the investigation of cross-cultural competence in academic settings is rudimentary, but needs to be stepped up because of the increasing influx of international students into Malaysia.

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INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, people are thrown into the Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous (VUCA) world. Businesses, educational institutions, students and individuals face these four distinct types of challenges. Universities and colleges can no longer operate in silos and train students for the local setting. This is because globalisation brings students and academics of different cultures together, in the exchange of information through the virtual platform. Student and staff exchange also increases mobility, and cross-cultural contact is unavoidable.

The challenge of cross-cultural contact is not only the language barrier in intercultural communication. However, various parties have targeted language by learning foreign languages in order to prepare themselves to work with foreign counterparts. Definitely knowing the language spoken by people from another culture prevents misunderstandings and conflicts due to unfamiliarity with another language. To prepare students for a future which involves interactions with other cultures, universities and colleges arrange exchange programmes for their students to study and live in foreign settings for short periods of time. Living in foreign settings has an additional advantage in that individuals gain cultural knowledge and experience through daily interactions with people from different cultures. This will lead to a better understanding of other cultures, a simple way of expressing of cross-cultural competence.

CROSS-CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Cross-cultural competence comprises intercultural competence and cultural intelligence (Li, 2020). Of these two constructs, intercultural competence is better understood due to more research on it. First, “intercultural competence is determined by the level of intercultural knowledge, the ability to act as a mediator between representatives of one’s own and foreign-language cultures, to determine the reasons for the violation of intercultural communication and to effectively eliminate misunderstandings and conflict situations caused by intercultural differences on the basis of emotional and value relationships” (Bakhov et al., 2021, p.51). Researchers in other countries have found that cultural awareness training for intercultural competence can be effectively conducted using music (Khasanova, 2020), virtual reality technology (Akdere et al., 2021) and story circles (Deardorff, 2019).

Intercultural competence can be developed using a simple activity such as storytelling. Stories can be a powerful tool to change behaviours and reinforce values. The following description of story circles is based on Deardorff (2019, pp. 13-15). Story Circles are conducted by having a group of people share personal experiences, explore similarities and differences. The stories enable people to explore similarities with individuals they consider to be vastly different from them. The learning of intercultural competence does not only happen through the cognitive mode, but also through building of emotional connections. In sharing stories of joy and pain, individuals make themselves vulnerable, and in

process, they connect on many levels, including emotional, mental, spiritual, and even physical levels. An important part of Story Circles is the self- and group reflections. The cognitive and emotional learning can lead to behavioural changes, although individuals can adopt behaviours that seem to be open to culturally different groups without the cognitive and emotional learning taking place. Story Circles develop respect, curiosity, self- and other awareness, and relationship building, which are important elements of intercultural competencies development.

Second, individuals differ in their ability to interact with people from other cultures, which is why a study of cultural intelligence is crucial. Cultural intelligence refers to an individual's ability to adapt effectively to a new cultural setting, and it involves metacognitive, cognitive, motivational and behavioural dimensions (Earley & Ang, 2003). Cultural intelligence has been studied more often in work contexts and found to be crucial for promoting knowledge transfer in multinational corporations (Ali et al., 2019; Vlajčić et al., 2019), and inclusive leadership (Bratianu, Iliescu, & Paiuc, 2021; Paiuc, 2021). The four dimensions of cultural intelligence are explained next, using a case study in a multinational corporation.

Cultural intelligence influences knowledge transfer processes of senior expatriate managers working in subsidiaries of multinational corporations in Croatia (Vlajčić et al., 2019). The study found that metacognitive, motivational and behavioural dimensions of cultural intelligence have significant effects on knowledge transfer, with the exception of cognitive cultural intelligence. Metacognitive cultural intelligence, or conscious awareness of cultural interactions, enables the managers to assess their own thoughts and thoughts of others regarding culture, and strategise when experiencing different cultures. Motivational cultural intelligence refers to "a person's ability to channel energy and attention towards gaining knowledge about cultural differences" and find ways to overcome them (Vlajčić et al., 2019, p. 7). Behavioural cultural intelligence, or the ability to be flexible in verbal and nonverbal communication, enables the managers to interact with local employees. Interestingly, the previous international experience of the expatriate managers does not moderate the relationship between cultural intelligence in all its dimensions and knowledge transfer. An extrapolation of the findings leads to the conclusion that individuals with high cultural intelligence can adapt and function better in unfamiliar environments.

IMPORTANCE OF CROSS-CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Cross-cultural competence enables individuals to keep abreast of new developments in the world and participate effectively in transnational teams, whether it is for work, studies, or NGO work. Bartel-Radic and Giannelloni (2017) stated that the constructs of intercultural competence and cultural intelligence have been studied separately by researchers in the past, and they need to be studied together to understand intercultural sensitivity. In an increasingly interconnected world, students who graduate from universities and colleges may seek employment in other countries or in multinational corporations. Here they encounter new cultures and this is when cross-cultural competence eases their adjustment to social norms that differ from their own.

In the case of Malaysia, empirical findings on cross-cultural competence of the student population are still lacking. Up till the last decade, most of the flow of students is from Malaysia to other countries. Malaysia has 59,144 students studying abroad according to UNESCO (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2023). Now Malaysia is attracting foreign students in larger numbers and there is an influx. Over 120,000 international students from more than 130 countries are studying in Malaysia (AECC, 2023). In view of the current situation, it is important to find out the level and type of cross-cultural competence that Malaysian students have, to estimate how likely they are to avoid accidental disrespect, misunderstanding and the erosion of trust when they study or work alongside individuals from other cultural backgrounds (Learnlight, 2020). By exploring intercultural competence and cultural intelligence in a single study, it is possible to find out how and whether they intersect. This is a potential area of research which will produce novel findings on the relationship between intercultural competence and cultural intelligence, if any.

The findings can also be used as a needs analysis for cross-cultural training by institutions which are gearing up for more international students in the student population. Knowing the cross-cultural competence level of local and international students in Malaysia will provide an empirical basis for cultural training. Universities that are enrolling international students from various countries like China, Indonesia and the Western countries can use the findings as an indication of the current state of cross-cultural competence, and conduct cross-cultural training accordingly. Better cross-cultural competence will decrease incidents of avoid accidental disrespect, misunderstanding, and conflict. Therefore, I encourage researchers to explore cross-cultural competence to understand how prepared students and the academic community are in the increasingly seamless world of academia.

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