Creating a Dynamic and Engaging Learning Environment for Faculty Members and Students
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Study abroad programs have brought up a concern for improving students’ abilities to deal with difference. As Resident Director for the Beloit College Ecuador Seminar for the last seven years, I have witnessed and shared moments of frustration with students’ inability to cope with foreign culture. It is a widespread belief and popular expectation that increased contact with representatives from other cultures will result in a better understanding and friendly attitudes. This is actually the hope of every parent, administrator or professor who sends a young person on a study abroad program. Of course, this assumption is disappointing when one realizes that after the first moment of euphoria upon arrival in a foreign country some American students start isolating themselves in homogenous groups where identity is reinforced. This of course, hinders the opportunity or motivation to construe significant categories to approach difference.

At this moment, students face culture shock. Culture shock, or adaptation to a new culture, mirrors the complexity of life experiences including, of course, perceptions of one’s own and foreign cultures. Facing difference is a challenge that pulls us out of our comfort zone, but also forces us to leave our enclave of learning abilities rehearsed and reinforced over the course of many years. The fact of having become passive learners instead of actors in our learning processes, the fact of adopting judgmental attitudes from others instead of questioning our behaviors and assumptions, and of developing low tolerance for ambiguity and difference instead of lowering our defenses puts us immediately in a disadvantageous position with respect to a different culture. How has our previous education prepared us for this experience?

Preparation for a study abroad program usually includes courses on the history, culture, literature, music, art, and language which will ultimately take care of the academic or formal preparation, and will provide the framework for the abroad experience. Undoubtedly, students will feel more comfortable, accepted and integrated in the new environment if they can maintain a conversation on current political events with a local friend or a host family member. This will raise their self-esteem, which is threatened by the simple fact of not knowing the new communication codes.

Even a more common way of preparing for studying abroad consists of informal meetings with other students who have already been to the same country, and can provide some insight on the customs and do’s and don’ts in the foreign country. Students feel comfortable, especially with information provided by their peers, because that lowers their level of anxiety in front of the unknown, and somehow it makes the new experience more predictable for them. They are far from understanding that every encounter is a new experience and that nonverbal communication cannot be learned in a formal history classroom or even predicted from their friends’ experience.

Undoubtedly, nowadays there are many other sources students can draw from to prepare for an experience abroad, for example, orientation programs, courses on intercultural communication, published material, and web information. Nevertheless, true cross-
cultural communication will only occur when the person opens up to the possibility of facing what is different, and lowers his/her defenses in front of the unknown.

It is a basic premise of this presentation that students’ inappropriate behavior when confronted with a cross-cultural situation, responds to a learning environment that reinforces values, behaviors and attitudes that exacerbate their awareness of difference of identity group.

Implicit in the idea described above is the proposition that unless a more meaningful and engaging learning environment is enhanced; students will easily fall back into the old habit of dropping off to their comfort zone when confronted with difference. The most important point to note is that allowing students to take an active role in their learning process will train and empower them to face situations open and squarely, which originate high levels of anxiety.

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity of Milton J. Bennet,\(^1\) based on “meaning making” models of cognitive psychology shows how changes in cognitive structure are linked to an evolution in attitudes and behavior toward cultural difference in general.

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity or DMIS is divided into Ethnocentric Stages and Ethnorelative Stages.

**Figure 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denial</th>
<th>Defense</th>
<th>Minimization</th>
<th>Acceptance</th>
<th>Adaptation</th>
<th>Integration</th>
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Ethnocentric Stages

Ethnocentric is defined as using one’s own set of standards and customs to judge all people, often unconsciously. Ethnorelative means feeling comfortable with many standards and customs, and having the ability to adapt behavior and judgments to a variety of interpersonal settings.

During the first three stages, people have very little ability if any, to construe cultural differences, either in simple or complex ways. I would go even further and say that student behavior during the first stages responds to a learning environment that has stripped them of of their creativity and ability to construe difference. Unlike the first three stages in which there is an actual paralysis of action, in the last three stages, people engage in cognitive activities such as problem solving, active communication, interaction skills, development of communication patterns, and reflection on one’s own and others’ values and beliefs. As we shall see, all the latter cognitive activities correspond to the characteristics that an engaging learning environment should depict in order to bring about meaningful changes in the education process.

The description of the three last stages in the DMIS brings us directly to the main point of this presentation. How can we prepare ourselves and students to face, accept, adapt and integrate the difference? Can that be done within a classroom? In short, how can we, as educators, create a dynamic and engaging learning environment to allow students become the active agent of their learning process? How can we help the students to make the most out of their experience abroad? It is my belief that
preparation for study abroad programs should take up a new direction if we want to succeed.

The idea of an engaging learning environment or learning community is not new. Beginning in the early 1990’s, American universities and colleges started reconstructing curricula to change traditional ways of approaching the learning process. It is beyond the scope of this presentation to mention the achievements of this important transformation. Nevertheless, I would like to stress two relevant aspects: to achieve an engaging learning environment, both professors and students should become active learners. Engaging in a meaningful learning environment requires a great deal of research on the part of the instructor on innovative learning and teaching techniques and the emotional component of the process as well. Secondly, it refers us to the ability on the part of the instructor to bridge information on the above mentioned topics with the actual content of the course, together with implementing the best learning framework for the student inside and outside the class.

Before looking at the components of a meaningful learning environment, I would like to draw your attention briefly to the theoreticians of the principles held in active learning. The authors considered here are related to experiential education, but the principle of an active role on the part of the learner is shared by all of them. In the first place, there is John Dewey (1938) who, at the time, challenged traditional, rationalist, scientific and technological approaches to education, and grounded learning in experience. Later, Kurt Lewin (1951) “expressed support for the individual learner as an active agent in the learning process through his or her interaction with the surrounding environment”. The third one is Piaget (1952), who conceptualized “learning as a process where intelligence is shaped by experience over time.”

Finally, many educators of experiential learning make frequent reference to Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. Paulo Freire stresses some aspects when building the “pedagogy of the oppressed”. In the first place, dialogue involving respect. Respectful dialogue, being a cooperative activity, should prevent people from acting on another, but rather working with each other. Freire believes that too much education involves “banking”, which means the educator makes “deposits” in the educatee, thus reducing the ability of the learners of becoming or completing themselves as human beings. Freire believes the education process should empower men and women to transform reality.

As mentioned before, the term active is a key word to understand the whole concept of MLE. In Meaningful Learning Environments learners are engaged in building a process syllabus through informed choices, as well as negotiating on the assessment process, learning strategies and methodology for the class. In other words, students are given the opportunity to tailor the course to meet their needs. Many of you will probably be asking the question: And how do they know what they need to learn? Most of the time they don’t, because they have not been trained to make that type of decisions, but it is worthwhile remembering that an MLE is not meant to leave the student on his/her own. Learners should constantly receive assistance, support, guidance and feedback from the instructor. A good way to illustrate what goes on in an MLE is to compare the learning process with learning how to operate a car. In such a situation, we can imagine the student being in complete control of the car in a real situation, but always being able to turn to the instructor’s assistance. If not totally engaged in deciding on the course content, the instructor can offer an introductory explanation on the topics expected to be
covered by the end of the course and have them decide on other aspects such as the chronology of the content, methodology, learning techniques, strategies to present the content, and assessment. Or else, let’s ask ourselves the question: How do people learn in natural environments? Are content and rules given a priori in a natural learning process?

**Collaborative behavior**
Students learn to work in collaboration with their peers. Again, in natural environments, people seek support and help from others. Learning should reflect this tendency and, in this way, students learn to **negotiate dialogue and solve problems in real situations**. Furthermore, a classroom reflects the complexity of the real world. Different people with different backgrounds are put together in search of a common goal. What can be more challenging than this situation?

On the other hand, collaborative work is not easy. Many students will see in this activity a way out of class work. For this reason, the instructor needs to be aware that students are developing their skills to build up their knowledge. The instructor, from his role of facilitator, should throw in light regarding how much work can be carried out in collaboration with others, and how much can involve multidisciplinary tasks. Students’ skills will evolve from simple and unsophisticated to more complex, as they discover their own strengths and weaknesses.

**Problem solving skills**
Acknowledging differences in a classroom on the part of the instructor implies more engaging and complex teaching strategies. Furthermore, many instructors tend to simplify the content of the course, present simple versions of complex theoretical concepts, and explain them repeatedly in the expectation of having everyone in the class understand even the most difficult ideas. Students, on the other hand, praise professors who “explain very well” and facilitate learning. What is the mechanism behind this situation? Experienced knowledgeable instructors who pass on their knowledge and experience to students and, at the other end, inexperienced students who absorb like “blank slates” what professors transmit to them. Obviously, in such a situation, the class becomes a predictable space for both: students and instructors. Levels of anxiety are lowered and, in the best of cases, they are non existent. Nobody has to deal with anxiety and tension which most of the time looks for a form of relief in the action of withdrawal or hostility.

What happens in intercultural communication when a person cannot figure out new verbal, nonverbal languages, signs or symbols, and miscommunication leads to misinterpretation? Memory falls back into old and easy patterns of behavior to alleviate the stress of the unknown. Familiar mechanisms will be used even more. The result of being exposed to a learning environment which deprives the student of the ability of problem solving in a real life situation is predictable at this point: withdrawal, which in turn reflects what happens when a student feels threatened by a difficult class. Thus, we can conclude that a MLE empowers the student to confront and respond not only to immediate stimuli, but strengthens students’ skills to confront high anxiety or tension in cross-cultural situations.
Reflective activities

Traditional methods based on lectures and textbooks readings present limitations. One is related to context-bound learning. Students are presented with a section of content and strategy on how to solve specific problems. Next, they are given examples of how to solve these specific problems and, finally, provided with additional practice that students develop as homework. This strategy confronts us with two related limitations: problem solving strategies are bound to a specific type of problems. When confronted with different problems in different contexts, students usually fail to find answers or reflect on problem solving strategies that they have learned. A second limitation is related to the shallow nature of traditional instruction. Strategies learned in the class do not help students explain life experiences and personal behaviors. Learning then, is not a holistic experience, but rather a fragmentary way of perceiving the world. Learning becomes meaningful when the student can take a piece of information, pass the threshold of short-term memory, make it dwell in long-term memory, and give it serious considerations as to how that new information creates meaning, relates to other experiences, and leads to personal growth and further action.

Reflective activities require total engagement from both ends in the learning process. The instructor is not passing on information to the students, but helping them think and question the decisions they have made for the course in terms of learning strategies, methodology, and most importantly, whether the answers they are finding along the way correspond to the goals and objectives they propose for the course. In other words, reflection needs to be meaningful and create interest in the student. According to Dewey, reflection should fulfill four conditions in order to be educative: “a) it must generate interest in the learner, b) it must be intrinsically worthwhile to the learner; c) it must present problems that awaken new curiosity and create a demand for information; and d) it must cover a considerable time span and foster development over time”.

How can reflective activities have an impact on study abroad experiences? Being able to understand, trace and reflect on the physiological and psychological effects of culture shock when confronted with a cross-cultural situation will prevent a person from rushing into the fight or fly response. The latter kind of reaction can work perfectly in a situation where life is put at risk, but not when there is a need for careful understanding and deliberation of different verbal and non-verbal languages to achieve smoother channels of communication.

Reflection activities can be carried out in different ways such as writing journals, directed readings discussed in the class, role play, and class presentations. Nevertheless, I believe writing helps to circumscribe meaningful events, organize experiences, and trace relevant moments that connect past and present learning experiences.

Communication

Once more, this activity should mirror real life situations and should be meaningful to achieve true solutions. What are students expected to do when facing a cross-cultural misunderstanding? Converse, talk, role play, express their feelings, articulate thoughts, and trace the origin of problems and emotional disturbances. Thoughtful communication in both a MLE and a cross-cultural situation will enormously lower anxiety levels. The final goal is to learn to listen empathically and to communicate face-to-face, rather than through a screen of judgmental values.
Summary
To conclude, I am arguing here that a MLE is more than an effective way to develop cognitive abilities, learning and communicative skills, problem-solving competence, besides building up on emotional ability to tackle difference and cross-cultural communication in an appropriate and accurate way. For many people, it takes training, alteration of life-long habits, and thoughtful consideration, to achieve any progress. We can learn about the history, the language, the culture, and the art of a specific country to acquire knowledge, but this does not mean that we have created competence to approach difference. Learning to identify and lower anxiety that triggers defense mechanisms is an important prerequisite for the development of cultural empathy. Using creativity and imagination to intellectually and emotionally integrate difference will only be accomplished if students, instructors, and institutions commit themselves to making the necessary efforts to create meaningful learning environments, where the main concern is the holistic growth of everyone.

2 Campus Compact. Introduction to Service-Learning. Toolkit: Readings and Resources for Faculty, (Providence: Brown University, 2000), 35
3 Ibid., 35
4 Smith, Mark K. Paulo Freire, http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-freir.htm,