

Reflections on the Assessment of ICC in Youth Exchanges

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Why do we need assessment of intercultural competence in our programs?

When we think about evaluation of our exchange programs, two approaches readily come to mind: *Summative* evaluations, often in the form of scientific impact studies, which may provide us with insights on program and organization development. Their results may be used for marketing purposes in order to position our organizations in the ever more competitive exchange market. On a smaller scale, *formative* evaluations, usually in the form of systematic feedback from program participants, provide us with hints on the improvement of specific program elements as part of quality assurance. Both types of evaluation are often seen as something “extra” and apart from operative program work, requiring special expertise and sometimes even outside resources.

Due to the non-formal character of our programs, for which we do not offer grades or credit points as in formal education, *self-reflection* as part of the individual learning process is usually not regarded as evaluation. In recent years instruments for self-evaluation have been developed in formal education at university-level (Holmes & O’Neill, 2012) as well as in non-formal settings, for example in Germany as *Certificate of Competence International* (2014). The latter development is largely driven by the desire to gain recognition for non-formal education programs as well as for informal learning activities, thus making them “count” for individual competence portfolios.

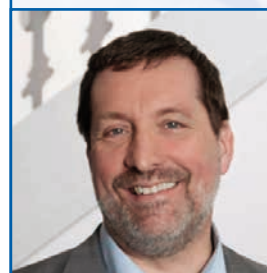
Apart from these strategic considerations I would like to emphasize that self-reflective evaluation is an integral part of all human learning: “Reflective observation” (of concrete experience) and “Abstract conceptualization” constitute two of four phases of Kolb’s (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle. It appears that self-reflection of the learning process is a pre-requisite of (1) *becoming aware* of learning insights and acquired skills, of (2) *transferring*

them to appropriate contexts outside the learning environment, and of (3) *evaluating* the feasibility and effectiveness of that application. Such self-reflective evaluation happens as a “private” (and usually pre-conscious) activity in managing our everyday lives.

How does our concept of culture determine our definition of intercultural competence – and our perspective of “measuring” or “assessing” it?

If we understand culture as a process of observing and negotiating differences in perception, sense-making and action preferences, it immediately becomes clear that we cannot define a fixed set of knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors to describe intercultural competence. That approach were feasible only, if we understood culture as an essence, and the objective of intercultural learning as increasing the ability to perform appropriately in a different cultural environment, as indeed is the position taken by Early, Ang and Tan (2006) in their concept of “cultural intelligence”, abbreviated CQ in reference to the denotation EQ for emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995), which itself is a variation on the classical acronym IQ for cognitive intelligence. The purpose of using CQ is to cope well in an unfamiliar cultural environment, and that is achieved by imitating the behavior of people from the target culture and by learning or inferring the rules underlying that behavior. Knowledge of the rules and appropriateness of behavior in specified situations may simply be measured by a test or by structured observation. The heavy emphasis placed on adjustment of exchange students to their host environment, and the “total immersion” approach traditionally propagated by exchange organizations clearly follow that descriptive view of culture.

A constructivist view of culture, however, maintains that culture is generated by interaction,



on the basis of established (habitual, learned, or conventionalized) behavioral patterns and perceptions of reality. Cultural differences do not exist as such, but become apparent in specific cultural encounters in which the actors' views and reactions cannot be predicted, but need to be experienced and explored in the situation – one's own cultural orientation may only be experienced in contrast to another orientation. In this conception of culture, the purpose of applying cultural intelligence is to contribute to better mutual understanding – to generate a shared bridge-building culture for achieving the objective of the encounter, e.g. completing a shared task, arriving at a common understanding, or exchanging views in an insightful way. This constructivist paradigm of cultural intelligence (CI) was introduced in 2008 by the Scandinavian scholars Elisabeth Plum, Benedikte Achen, Inger Dræby, and Iben Jensen. In contrast to the North American CQ approach it maintains that cultural intelligence can not only be displayed by individuals, but by groups and by organizations as well. CI is not focused on national cultural differences, but takes into account all kinds of cultural identities. Depending on the situational context specific cultural identities become salient – sometimes by conscious assessment of context, sometimes unconsciously, but always as a result of comparison with others.

Intercultural competence understood as cultural intelligence (CI) cannot be “measured” as a given quantity at a point in time, but is assessed as it is being developed – in terms of the outcome of a cultural encounter, and also in reflecting the qualitative developments in its process. The CI paradigm thus seems to lend itself particularly well to the idea of self-reflective evaluation.

Which components of intercultural competence could be derived from a constructivist concept of culture?

Plum et al. (2008) propose three components of cultural intelligence: cultural understanding, intercultural engagement, and intercultural communication. These components can be related to cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects and thus lend themselves to the well-established “think – feel – do” structure of many competence models. In taking that structure one step further, I would like to propose a six-component model as summarized in the diagram below.

Cultural Knowledge, as one of the two cognitive components, comprises the following abilities:

- General knowledge about cultural differences, and specific knowledge about cultural determinants of other participants in an encounter.
- Cultural self-awareness, i.e. the ability to see oneself as a cultural being and to know that one's thoughts and actions may be culturally determined.
- Recognition and acceptance of one's own cultural identities, also with regard to organizational and disciplinary affiliations.
- Ability to describe rather than to stereotype encountered cultural groups with regard to central standards at a level of abstraction appropriate to learning needs.

Cultural Understanding takes the knowledge aspect one step further in terms of more abstract insights:

- Understanding the meaning of „culture“ as a subjective orientation system.

Six components of intercultural competence*



- Flexibility to understand a situation from different cultural perspectives and within a broader context.

Intercultural Sensitivity as prominently described in Milton Bennett's (1993) *Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity* (DMIS) provides the emotional basis for feeling at ease and for engaging pro-actively in intercultural encounters:

- Ability to sense and discover that cultural differences are at play in a situation.
- Ability to observe and contain one's own emotional reactions and to handle them and other participants' emotions constructively, as well as knowing that those reactions may be culturally determined.
- Emotional maturity and mental flexibility to question one's cultural self-knowledge and one's preconceptions about members of other cultural groups.

Intercultural Engagement addresses the motivational and attitudinal aspects of engaging constructively in intercultural encounters, as well as the openness to be changed by them:

- Basic attitude to strive for mutual attunement in intercultural encounters: Motivation to understand people with different ideas and feelings, to making oneself understood by them, in order to generate results together.
- Basic attitude to explore commonalities and to respect diversity in every relationship.
- Being present, i.e. creating rapport with other participants in the encounter, and being in contact with one's own thoughts, feelings, and (re)actions
- Learning attitude, curiosity, and courage to allow oneself to be changed by the intercultural encounter.

Intercultural Communication encompasses basic skills of understanding and expression outside of one's familiar orientation system:

- Ability to apply various communication tools for improving contact and mutual understanding in an intercultural encounter.
- Ability to explore and to understand culture-specific subtexts in the use of another language, and to use them appropriately, e.g. in playing with words and in joking.

- Ability to move the conversation to a meta-level, i.e. to observe and to address the process of communication, so that participants become more attentive and are able to reflect the situation from a more encompassing, "helicopter" perspective.

Intercultural Effectiveness refers to more complex abilities of maintaining resilience in difficult intercultural encounters as well as of transferring insights and practices to other contexts:

- Ability to turn off one's cultural autopilot and revert to manual control, i.e. to suspend some of one's own-cultural routines and to derive context-specific meaning together with the other party or parties involved.
- Ability to be persistent, to focus on the possibilities of the situation and to seek feedback.
- Willingness to experiment with unfamiliar behaviors in the situation and even to cross a threshold of embarrassment in order to move beyond habitual practices.
- Ability to derive insights and practices from one intercultural encounter (e.g. exchange) and to transfer this learning to other contexts, in which other demarcation lines are salient (e.g. organizational or disciplinary differences).

The latter ability comes close to the overall purpose of youth exchanges of enabling participants to contribute actively to intercultural understanding in an increasingly globalized world, as alluded to in the AFS Educational Goals (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2013):

- To contribute actively and positively in school, community, and family life.
- To be willing and ready to work with others to help build peace, to improve world conditions, and to commit to actions that will bring about a just and peaceful world.
- To engage in voluntary service toward the improvement of the local and global communities.

Similarly, other educational goals from that catalogue, which is structured into personal, interpersonal, cultural, and global realms, may be applied to the other components of intercultural competence in the search for appropriate assessment criteria.

Which new approaches to assessing intercultural competence seem promising for the field of youth exchanges?

As a general principle, assessment methods and instruments should be integrated into the orientation and coaching programs to provide feedback to participants and opportunities for self- and interactive reflection of their learning process. In an extensive overview of assessment practices of intercultural competence, Sinicrope, Norris, and Watanabe (2007) list three kinds of direct assessment approaches, which permit process-oriented, interactive evaluations:

- **Performance assessment** of behavior in real-time situations, e.g. simulations, role plays.
- **Portfolio assessment** by reflections and reviews of journal or collected work.
- **In-depth interviews** on beliefs and practices.

Drawing from these approaches I would like to propose the following leads to assessment methods for the six components of intercultural competence.

Assessment (or indeed “measurement”) of **cultural knowledge** could be applied as feedback on the cognitive learning progress. An AFS-customized knowledge test could be designed as a both challenging and entertaining quiz show at the conclusion of pre-departure orientations. Focused quizzes on host-country-specific knowledge could be provided as online service for participants before their departure, possibly with links to respective learning resources.

Evaluation of **cultural understanding** addresses “deeper” and more abstract knowledge. Suitable instruments need to touch upon attribution patterns and hypothesis-building on cultural issues. A well-established training instrument, the culture assimilator, presents descriptions of critical incidents involving cultural differences, followed by alternative explanations of possible reasons for the outcome. For each critical incident, personal, situational, and cultural attributions are presented so that clients’ response patterns in choosing explanations they feel are applicable give feedback on their attribution tendencies and point out alternative explanations. An assimilator on culture-general issues provided as part of pre-departure orientations could be utilized to

reflect attribution patterns, as self-study device with debriefing in peer tandems or by facilitated group discussion. Culture assimilators on host-country-specific issues could be provided online as serious game for program participants in the same host country.

Assessment of **intercultural sensitivity** should touch upon the subjective world views of participants with regard to cultural differences, as expressed, for example, in journals or diaries. E-Mail messages sent to participants every few days with small observation and reflection tasks could serve as impulses for journal writing. Journal entries could then be reviewed with a mentor in the host country. For a more systematic evaluation, Pruegger and Rogers (1994) describe a method for content analysis of personal documents.

Reviews of journal entries may also be applied in assessing **intercultural engagement**, both on-program in the host country by interviews and coaching on participation practices in the new environment, and as follow-up after returning to the home country on dealing with diversity and on reflecting personal changes as result of the exchange experience.

Aptitude in **intercultural communication** may be assessed by a number of established instruments: mastery of the host-country language could be gauged by an advanced language test or by ratings such as the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages’s (ACTFL, 1999) Proficiency Guidelines for Speaking. More encompassing assessment of communication skills may be gained from observation of role-playing or simulation of intercultural interaction scenarios, aided by an observation checklist or by videotaping for feedback and reflection, and followed by “act storming” of alternative communication strategies to try out different approaches to constructive dialogue and problem solving.

Assessment of **intercultural effectiveness** clearly calls for observing behavior in more challenging situations as well as for long-term monitoring of learning impact: Role-play simulations of critical incidents involving antagonistic interactions could utilize similar observation and debriefing methodology as described above. For more intensive reflection of the simulation experience, the *Critical Moment Dialogue* (CMD) from Personal Leadership (Schaetti, Ramsey & Watanabe, 2008) offers guiding questions for debriefing dialogues.

Another coaching instrument which could be applied to actual experiences from the recent past is

the *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* (AIE; Byram *et al.*, 2009), a guideline for self- and facilitated reflection of meaningful intercultural encounters.

With a view to utilization and transfer of insights and acquired practices to different contexts the assessment method of choice is a semi-structured follow-up interview some time after the exchange experience. Guiding questions should be general enough in order not to be suggestive, and should elicit more complex narratives, for example, asking interviewees to bring along an artifact to talk about – “some concrete manifestation of what the [...] exchange experience has produced in the ways you have come to live, work, think, and feel” (Bachner & Zeutschel, 2009, p. 82).

Which perspectives and benefits could be construed from self-reflective assessment practices for AFS organizations?

Integrating self-reflective assessments as opportunities for feedback and self-evaluation throughout the orientation, on-program, and follow-up cycle will enhance the educational value of our programs, not only for participants, but also for program staff who will derive immediate feedback on the impact of orientation sessions and on-program learning reflections. Some assessment methods not only lend themselves for such formative evaluation, but their results could be documented for greater numbers of participants over longer periods of time for more systematic analyses and summative evaluation of program quality and impact.

It should also have become apparent that most assessment methods proposed here require qualified observers, facilitators, and coaches, often on a one-to-one basis and over longer periods of time. They provide a multitude of mentoring activities for experienced volunteers who will not only gain professionally relevant skills as facilitators and coaches, but will also be able to reflect their own intercultural learning experience in their interaction and dialogue with younger program participants.

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