

Intercultural Sensitivity Development: the challenge of Globalization for American Higher Education

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Abstract

Issues of social justice are becoming more and more complicated in the wake of Globalization. With his declaration that “the world is flat”, Thomas Friedman (2005) has probably coined the metaphor for the age in which students in the US and the world are supposed to live and work. But flattening all differences and not recognizing the distinctive cultural and ethnic traits of a diverse body of people can lead to grave social injustice and gross misunderstanding. In the recent past we have all witnessed the tragic fall-outs of such misunderstanding across the world. My paper explores and analyzes documents from various sources highlighting the need for intercultural sensitivity development. Thereafter, I use Milton J. Bennett’s developmental model of intercultural sensitivity, to suggest a possible way to develop programs to sensitize students and faculty for intercultural sensitivity development and gain “cultural competence”.

Intercultural Sensitivity Development: the Challenge of Globalization for American Higher Education

Rationale for Intercultural Education:

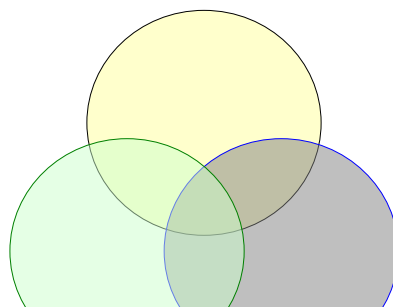
Thomas Friedman (2005) has perhaps coined the metaphor for the age with his declaration that the world is flat. Whether they like this metaphor or not, present and future students in America and the rest of the world have to live and work in this “flat” world. As Friedman points out, the already smaller world has now become tiny. The playing fields have been leveled, and the long-standing American competitive advantage is disappearing. Students are now crossing continents to receive more advanced education in different fields of study. There has been a steady exodus of students from the developing countries to the developed countries like the US. More than a decade now students from different developing countries have been coming to the US for higher studies. The college and university campuses are becoming more and more diverse. In the wake of globalization fields such as business, technology, science, law and medicine can no longer be limited to a single national context in today’s level or “flat” world. A bird flu epidemic in a developing country in Asia or sub-Saharan Africa is a matter of great concern for people in the developed nations as well. Companies large and small are now exposed to intense competition on a worldwide basis and must be engaged in the global marketplace if they wish to keep pace. Research enterprises and scientific communities can likewise no longer consider the implications of their work solely on a local basis. Just as it is unthinkable that Ford or Microsoft would design products solely for the US market; legal decisions, scientific and medical studies, as well as public policy decisions, must be undertaken with global considerations.

Of special interest to educators is the fact that the shrinking, leveling, and “flattening” of the world has changed the kinds of qualifications needed and expected of today’s professionals. Cross-cultural communication skills are in high demand in the global workplace. The implications of globalization for American education are therefore, enormous especially in the field of teaching language and culture.

Intercultural Context of US Higher Education:

Four fundamental forms of Capital Movement take place in this global world-the movement of Human capital, Financial Capital, Resource Capital and Power Capital. Education sector in the US is obviously concerned with the movement of the human capital. Because of its immigration history for hundreds of years and the history of slave trade, there has been tremendous domestic racial diversity. Moreover modern sociological and cultural movements like Women’s Rights, Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Rights had already enhanced the intercultural context of the US. Now, the huge movement of human capital in the form of students and scholars has made diversity more complex in the US higher education setting. Hence, it is becoming more and more important for researchers in the field of human development, to seek ways to develop “cultural competence”. To use the phrase used by Milton J. Bennett, “intercultural sensitivity development” is of paramount importance. Intercultural sensitivity can be defined as “developmental capacity for complex meaning making in intercultural situations.” (King & Baxter Magolda, 2004). “It requires personal maturity across a range of developmental domains.” (King & Baxter Magolda, 2004).

Cognitive Maturity



Bennett defines intercultural sensitivity in terms of “stages of personal growth...a continuum of increasing sophistication in dealing with cultural difference moving from ethnocentrism through stages of greater recognition and acceptance of difference”. The term Bennett uses to describe this stage is “ethnorelativism”.

Intercultural sensitivity is thus developmental and multidimensional- cognitive and epistemological, affective and emotional, interpersonal and behavioral, and intrapersonal i.e. relating to one’s own identity. The word “intercultural also needs a few clarifications. The term “multicultural” has a domestic focus with representational and sociological implications. Whereas, the term “cross-cultural” has a national focus and its approach is comparative and anthropological. As opposed to “multicultural” or “cross-cultural”, “intercultural” has an international focus. Hence, development of “intercultural sensitivity” needs an integrative approach based on interaction and communication. Let us now try to review a few news lines from the recent past to get a clearer picture of the real context of intercultural sensitivity development in the US Higher Education setting. In his *New York Times* review of Friedman’s book, *The World is Flat*, *Newsweek’s* Fareed Zakaria (2005) points to the irony that America is least prepared for globalization,

even though it created the forces driving it. “While hierarchies are being eroded and playing fields leveled...., are we conducting ourselves in a way that will succeed in this new atmosphere? Or will it turn out that, having globalized the world; the United States had forgotten to globalize itself?”

Diversity Education in the US:

Reading and researching on the current issues in the field of higher education in the United States gives a negative answer to the question asked by Zakaria. The US has not forgotten to globalize itself. There has been a steady trend in recent years to promote not just domestic diversity education but also international diversity education. Of course there are also complex political and security issues involved in the attention given towards such education. The National Defense Education Act in 1958, following the Soviet launch of Sputnik, is a testimony to the fact that globalization is not the only force driving this change. In recent years, following the massacre of 9/11, similar initiatives have been undertaken propelled by security issues. The Presidential announcement on January 5, 2006 regarding National Security Language Initiative (NSLI) is a clear signifier of this fact.

Security indeed is a major issue in this world and, it is itself related to Globalization and the premise under which globalization operates. If we take into consideration Friedman’s proposition of the world as a “flat” global play ground leveling all differences then, are we not once again falling prey to a sort of ethnocentric view point? The US has evolved from a period in the 1800s, when racial discrimination was written into laws, to a period in the 1960s and 1970s in which such discrimination was declared illegal. During the 1960s and 1970s, it may have been acceptable to say: "I treat

everyone the same." This was considered a fair and liberal way of treating others. However, this stance has certain limitations; it assumes that sameness equals fairness, an assumption that only holds true if the values and norms of people involved in an interaction are similar. The "sameness equals fairness" critique is not essentially informed by or necessarily tied to the predictable possibility of Euro-centric ethnocentrism-although it is an important consideration. It will be nonetheless inappropriate to justify treating everyone the same way even in the absence of Euro-centric ethnocentrism; as would be the case were all the US Public schools mandated to use only Spanish as the major and official language of instruction. Although this would not necessarily be Euro-centric ethnocentrism, it is still unfair to the many Americans whose first and only language is not Spanish.

An outline of the process individuals go through to move beyond this assumption of similarity is provided in the work of Milton Bennett (1993), who authored the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity. According to his model, such a statement places the speaker in an early stage of intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1993). In the US during 1980's and 90's organizations have attempted to go beyond racial discrimination issues and to "celebrate diversity." However, in the 21st century celebration of diversity falls far short of what is needed for effective collaboration not just between mainstream agencies and ethnic minority communities within the US but also with the growing population of people from diverse cultural background across the globe.

Current Intercultural Issues in the US:

A recent news line “American Professor Is Fired at University in United Arab Emirates for Using Controversial Cartoons in Class” (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 15, 2006), is a glaring example of the clash of the American ideal of Freedom of expression and the strong religious beliefs held by many Muslims across the world against any portrayal of the Prophet Muhammad. It is a matter of common knowledge for all of us now that this controversy has been raging for many months since the publication of the cartoons for the first time in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in September, 2005. Even here in the US, two editors of *The Daily Illini*, a student-led newspaper serving the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign have been suspended for printing the article. “The cartoons portray the prophet as a terrorist, including one that depicts Muhammed wearing a turban shaped as a bomb and another showing him turning away suicide bombers from Paradise because, he says, heaven ran out of virgins to be given to martyrs.” (Mendell, 2006) Incidents like this are extremely alarming. They point towards severe lack of intercultural sensitivity among both Non-Muslims and Muslims all across the world.

An article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* dated April 23, 2004 by Prof Elinor Burkett deals with similar lack of intercultural sensitivity. This is evident from the title of the article: “In Central Asia, an American Professor Finds Hostility Spiked With Cynicism”. Prof Burkett narrates her Fulbright experience as a Visiting Professor of Journalism in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan in this article. Reading this article we find that, though Prof. Burkett realizes the historical context of the earlier cold war and the lack of truth and correct information in a world censored for decades by the Soviet regime, yet she finds it extremely difficult to bridge the intercultural gap. At one point in the article

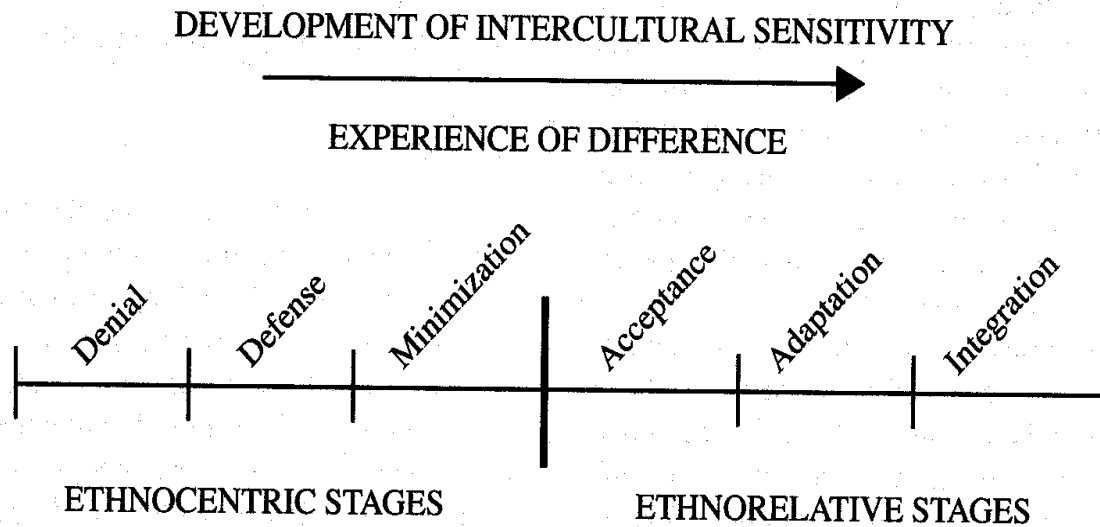
she recounts the experience of overhearing a faculty member at the University warning a student to beware of her, as she might be a “CIA or FBI” agent. As a reaction to this she writes, “Over the past three years, I have often wondered how I would have explained such suspicion if I arrived in Kyrgyzstan after September 11, 2001. Would I have simply assumed that the hostility was a result of the United States’ bombing of Afghanistan or its invasion of Iraq? But I landed in Central Asia in August 2001. And as I taught journalism in Bishkek, lectured in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, reported from Afghanistan and Iran, and traveled across Iraq, Russia, China, and Indochina over the course of the following year, I was forced to confront a more confounding tangle.” Even towards the end of the article we find that Prof Burkett is unable to untie this “confounding tangle”. She calls her interactions with her students in class, lessons in “Anti-Americanism 101” and treats the questions asked by the students as “verbal abuse”. But then, she also states- “Their antagonism felt vestigial, the persistently acrid smell of the cold war tinged with envy and the bitter odor of half-truth doled out by a sleazy press.” Proclaiming “An old hand in the third world, I’m not easily thrown by such blatant anti-Americanism”, Burkett fails to bridge the gulf between the two cultures and complains, “I’d moved to central Asia to train journalists, not to strike a blow for Uncle Sam.” She ends her article with a sigh: “As I made my way back to the hotel, I was struck by the odd parallel between that conundrum and my nation’s: Even if the United States became everyone’s paragon of virtue-a twisted tango, given the vagueness and endless mutations of virtue’s definition-how much really would change? Would the Russian press or Iranian television share that good news with people who have no means to change the channel?”

Another article in the *Chronicle* by Richard Pells, “America: Lost in Translation” and the editorial response to Pells’ article by Marcus Hall titled, “Foreigners and Americans Know Too Little About Each Other”, are also worth considering in this context. Marcus Hall of the University of Zurich aptly points out that, Pells’ article reveals the mixed results of his Fulbright-sponsored lecture tour of Indonesia. Pells is dismayed to find that “Indonesians know almost nothing about the United States, beyond what they’ve seen in Hollywood blockbuster movies.” According to him such ignorance should be combated “by launching a sustained effort to make America intelligible to Muslims”. But Hall points out that “it seems that pursuing agendas like the one suggested by Pells is precisely the sort of activity that digs Americans deeper in their ethnocentric holes.” He highlights “the need to cultivate both inward and outward foreign visions” and proposes “US based centers for Indonesian studies, Islamic studies, Asian studies, and European studies”. In the context of these events, American higher education is facing a pressing need and challenge for intercultural sensitivity development. But for organizations or individuals to move beyond "celebration" of difference to a real ability to work appropriately with cultural difference requires a planned sequence of development.

Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity:

Milton J. Bennett describes six stages of development in intercultural sensitivity. The stages provide a good framework for determining how to work with and improve the capacity for intercultural sensitivity and collaboration. Some of his stages of "cultural

sensitivity" include behaviors or adaptations which fall under the definition of "cultural competence."



1. Bennett refers to the first stage of the model as "denial." People in this stage are very unaware of cultural difference. If people are in this stage of intercultural sensitivity, a huge problem can be expected in the delivery of education, health, and social services. The task at this first stage of intercultural sensitivity is to recognize cultural differences that are escaping notice. The developmental need at this stage can be met by getting people involved in cultural awareness activities.

2. Whereas in the first stage we do not "see" cultural differences, in the second stage of cultural competence we do perceive cultural differences; however, differences from the norms of one's own group are labeled very negatively. They are experienced as a threat to the centrality and "rightness" of one's own value system. Bennett calls this stage "defense."

If people achieve the second level of intercultural sensitivity, they still fail to communicate effectively with diverse group. If they cannot communicate effectively, they cannot do the more complex task of collaborating effectively. The task in the second level of cultural sensitivity is to recognize and to become more tolerant of differences. The developmental need at this stage is to see basic similarities among people of different cultures.

3. In the third stage of intercultural sensitivity, “minimization”, a person tries to avoid stereotypes and even appreciate differences in language and culture. However, s/he still views many of their own values as universal, rather than viewing them simply as part of their own ethnicity. The task at the third level of intercultural sensitivity is to learn more about one’s own culture and to avoid projecting that culture onto other people's experience.

This stage is particularly difficult to pass through when one cultural group has vast and unrecognized privileges when compared to other groups and as Bennett points out “If the particular difference is perceived as a static value held by members of that culture” and not understood as a process. This problem is so invisible that people are often mystified when others consistently withdraw from collaborative activities.

4. The fourth stage in Bennett's model requires one to be able to shift perspective, while still maintaining their commitments to values. The task in this stage is to understand that the same behavior can have different meanings in different cultures. In order for any collaboration to be successful in the long-term, this stage of intercultural sensitivity must

be reached by the participants of the collaborative process. Bennett calls this stage "acceptance."

5. The fifth stage of intercultural sensitivity, "adaptation", may allow the person to function in a bicultural capacity. In this stage, a person is able to take the perspective of another culture and operate successfully within that culture. This ability usually develops in a two-part sequence. It requires that the person knows enough about his or her own culture and a second culture to allow a mental shift into the value scheme of the other culture, and an evaluation of behavior based on its norms not the norms of the individual's own culture of origin. This is referred to as "cognitive adaptation." The more advanced form of adaptation is "behavioral adaptation," in which the person can produce behaviors appropriate to the norms of the second culture.

6. In the sixth stage, the person can shift perspectives and frames of reference from one culture to another in a natural way. They become adept at evaluating any situation from multiple frames of reference. Stage six requires in-depth knowledge of at least two cultures (one's own and another), and the ability to shift easily into the other cultural frame of reference. The task at this level of development is to handle the identity issues that emerge from this cultural flexibility. Bennett calls this final stage of intercultural sensitivity "integration."

Implications:

Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity raises a few important questions. First, how could this information impact the educational programs in the US?

Second, how might it help the development of intercultural sensitivity? These questions have potential for opening up new fields of research in the future. The research questions to be considered are: Which background characteristics, pre-college experiences, and college experiences, or interactions thereof, contribute to intercultural sensitivity development? To what extent could an intensive program help the process of Intercultural Sensitivity development?

Researchers need to do more research to find answers to these questions and construct new epistemologies which would help in the development of new integrative programs and curriculum to sensitize students and faculty for intercultural sensitivity “integration”. Cross-cultural communication skills are in high demand in the global workplace. As the U.S develops increasing cultural heterogeneity, with complex social implications, the need for the development of “cultural competence” or “Intercultural Sensitivity” (to use Bennett’s terminology) has become even more urgent. The implications of globalization for American education are therefore, enormous.

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