

Chapter 41

Intercultural Programming Without Intercultural Competence: What Does It Look Like in Practice?

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ABSTRACT

While there are many studies pointing to the need for international students to interact with domestic students for language and culture learning, there are very few studies exploring these interactions across cultures and how to best facilitate them. The author of this chapter provides an overview of the literature on intercultural competence development in higher education, and then explains a research study exploring a Conversation Partner Program, pairing international and domestic students together for weekly conversations. Through analysis of interviews and conversations between partners, it became clear that intercultural competence was not likely to develop between the partners. Unique to this study are the discursive features of this lack of intercultural competence as well as the situated, relational and discourse-specific nature of the exploration of interaction.

INTRODUCTION

One dimension of the internationalization of higher education is increasing the enrollment of international students in order to increase profit for the host universities and foster intercultural learning (Altbach & Knight, 2007). There is the expectation that intercultural learning will improve among all students just through the presence of these international students. In actuality, there is a scarcity of research examining what happens when students engage with one another across differences and the intercultural programming that does exist on campus is not living up to the lofty intercultural rhetoric of internationalization plans. In this chapter, the author presents an overview of the literature on programming aimed at intercultural competence development of international and domestic students in higher education, pointing

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to the need for exploration of intercultural interaction as it exists in a conversation partner experience. Then, the author examines a Conversation Partner Program pairing U.S. domestic students and Chinese international students to meet for weekly conversations outside of class over a ten-week period. From both interviews and recorded conversations between conversation partner pairs, it seemed that the domestic and international students, with the exception of one student, were not showing they were likely to develop intercultural competence through engaging with one another. Discursive elements associated with this lack of intercultural competence and themes about student experience were identified from student conversations and interviews.

BACKGROUND

There is a disconnect between internationalization rhetoric, promising intercultural learning for all, and the realities of the programming tasked to enact the rhetoric in higher education. The study described in this chapter reflects the realities of intercultural programming, expected to foster effective intercultural communication, but falling short of that goal. In addition to the absence of institutional support for intercultural learning, higher education often reflects the power imbalances and pervasive avoidance of critical discussions in society. Goodman (2001) discusses this tendency for people to avoid meaningful discussions, particularly regarding our social identities. Goodman (2001) states,

The publicly perpetuated norm encourages avoidance of honest, meaningful discussions about our social identities, about social inequalities and about our experiences of them. People enter workshops with this internalized taboo and a lack of skill or comfort in having these types of discussions. (p. 70)

The inequality perpetuated in our society is reflected in higher education, and internationalization efforts often lack critical intercultural competence development necessary to make effective intercultural communication a reality. Given that internationalization efforts have been lagging in intercultural competence development, more exploration of what leads to intercultural competence development in specific contexts and how to best facilitate interactions is needed (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Deardorff, 2011; Jurgens & Robbins-O'Connell, 2008). The ethnographic study featured in this chapter describes students' experiences in a specific program aimed at fostering effective interaction, but like many other similar programs the students do not show they are likely to develop intercultural competence; rather than an examination of what leads students to become more interculturally competent, the featured study looks closely at what a lack of intercultural competence looks like in practice, in a particular intercultural program.

The chosen intercultural competence framework in this chapter is Deardorff's model (2006) of intercultural competence. Deardorff (2006) conducted a study where she found consensus among a wide variety of models from intercultural experts and created a new model from the overlapping points. By looking for consensus, this model tries to account for the complexity and variety in the field. The model delineates the attitudes, knowledge and skills necessary to develop a shift in one's frame of reference and a change in one's behavior in intercultural situations. The one point that all intercultural experts agreed on was the ability to see from others' perspectives, which becomes a focus of the analysis in the study described in this chapter.

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