

# Embedding Intercultural Learning in Organizations

Shawn Simpson

Welcome Office, Agence Iter France

**Abstract.** This paper presents the different recommendations on how to embed intercultural training in organizations, whatever those organizations may be, from international entities to universities, from NGOs to educational directorates and councils. The fundamental principle of this paper is that embedded intercultural learning depends on the visible and clear strategy of organizations who understand and promote diversity. The inherent benefits of intercultural learning and competence must be included in the vision statement of these learning organizations. The experience acquired in intercultural training sessions as well as the relevant events of a European project called FILE (Framework for Intercultural Learning), funded under the Grundtvig program, will be described.

**Keywords:** Intercultural Learning, Intercultural Competence, Intercultural Training.

## 1. Introduction

Intercultural specialists from the academic and business worlds have devised ways to understand the differences and similarities among our universal cultures. The theories, analyses, reference frameworks and training procedures which have been published and used over the last 40 years range from efficient to completely irrelevant, depending on the contexts in which they are applied.

The aim of this paper is not to criticize nor promote any one theory or any one approach. The aim of this paper is to open a discussion on what actually works in today's shifting environment. From the 5 dimensions of G. Hofstede to Stella Ting Toomey's face negotiation theory, from Edward T. Hall's humanistic approach to high and low context cultural factors to Milton Bennett's intercultural sensitivity models, these have all paved the way and contributed greatly to the advancement of intercultural sciences.

However, what is now apparent in our changing world and more specifically in our case, is the fact that one theory does not apply to all. Attempting to place the human dimensions of every culture into boxes, diagrams and lists of what to do and not to do, does not work. In our experience, what does work is the transfer of knowledge: knowledge about cultures and peoples, about languages and traditions, about individual pathways and experiences.

## 2. The International Learning Organization

A truly international learning organization must use its own resources: the knowledge of the people working in it and encourage this knowledge to be transferred from one to the other.

A truly international organization is one in which there is an international workforce working in teams, and not a headquarters dictating its mono-cultural policy to its subsidiaries across the world. In our case, this is especially true as 35 nationalities are present on the same site on the same day. Videoconferences and emails are used to communicate with other representations of the organization abroad but the internationality of the people working within the same buildings and the same offices is the aspect in which intercultural learning and competence should actually be embedded. The regular training sessions and informal events in which the people meet and exchange their views have demonstrated that there are no longer only 5 dimensions to helping us understand cultures, but many more. The aim of this paper is not to describe these other dimensions (which at this point are still not clear to me) but to simply point out that in my experience, intercultural understanding goes through the individual's intercultural experience rather than through understanding dimensions.

### 2.1. Intercultural Learning in an International Organization

Learning is dependent on many factors, not the least being our individual learning styles and learning cultures. Whether we are used to learning by rote, by taking notes or by communicating orally within the

learning framework, we are all subjected to the imprint left on us by our educational systems, our educational experiences and most of all our cultural approach to learning.

In an international organization as described above, learning in multicultural groups is a challenge and often a surprising success. This is simply due to the fact that if the knowledge imparted comes from the learners themselves with the trainer/teacher respecting their role as a simple facilitator, this knowledge is exponential. When training different nationalities on the same subject, say “intercultural awareness raising”, there is no need for the trainer to provide the learners with facts and figures and examples based on theory. On the contrary, this situation is ideal to exchange views and experiences on different subjects such as “what has been your experience when negotiating with a foreign partner? or “what do you remember most about a intercultural conflict?”.

A perfect example of this is a workshop I facilitated on “Working with the Chinese”. The participants were Indian, Japanese, French, English, American, Russian, Korean, Spanish, German and Chinese. One of the documents used was a list of “do’s and don’ts” taken from an intercultural website on how to work with the Chinese. In discussion groups, run by the Chinese themselves, participants were required to ask the Chinese representative if the list was correct. And as regularly happens in the cases of lists drawn up to help understand a certain culture, more than half of the advice and recommendations were wrong. Reactions to the list from the Chinese participants ranged from “not anymore” due to generational changes to “incorrect” depending on whether the situation occurred in a city or in a town.

Another example is relevant: when I announced a workshop entitled “Working with the English”, I received many emails from the Anglo-Saxon staff, asking me to change the title to “Working with the British”, then “Working with the English and the Scots”, then “Working with the British and the Northern Irish” and finally we all agreed upon the title “Working with the British and the Irish”. When you offer a seminar on, basically, learning “how the others work”, you cannot put everyone into the same basket. There are too many layers of diversity within one single nationality and too many angles of vision within a supposed “single culture”. That is why standards, dimensions and norms cannot be applied to actual hands-on learning.

So why is intercultural training still based on lists of what to do and not do, theories and concepts, when we can have the right information directly from the individuals concerned?

In my experience, “learning communities”, which can be described as informal groups of people who share the same desire to understand each other, have been the most important factor in promoting intercultural awareness. This came as a surprise since it was not an expected result of the training provided. These learning communities shaped themselves naturally due to common experiences shared in the training process.

These learning communities seem to be part of the process of embedding intercultural learning in any organization. As for any new policy which requires the support and adhesion of the personnel, key people need to be identified. These key players, or “relays of information” can be counted on to further and promote the policy being implemented. The creation of task forces, for example, can help in creating a momentum of learning which in our case, is not learning from the book but learning from each other.

Very often, when the size of the room chosen for the training session proved to be too small, this was due to these learning communities who had promoted the event, not to the tools used in promoting this event (newsletters, intranet, emails, posters). The role of internal communication in embedding intercultural learning is crucial. However, the role of those involved is paramount.

Intercultural learning is now in 2012 an open field in which the international learners should provide the learning content in the form of information on how they do things, how they see the world and how they work in international teams.

How much more interesting and experienced-based is this type of intercultural learning compared to the rolling out of theories and concepts which often are obsolete or not related to the case at hand?

Intercultural learning is learning from each other in an international context. The only way to achieve this is to hand over the learning responsibility to the learners themselves.

## **2.2. Intercultural Competence in an International Organization**

Competence is generally understood as a set of skills which allow people to be recognized as knowing what they are doing.

Intercultural competence can be defined here as the skills one develops over a lifetime of learning about other cultures, languages, traditions, beliefs and histories. Intercultural competence is not scoring high on an online test. Intercultural competence is not succeeding in selling goods to buyers from another country. Intercultural competence is not easily measured, cannot be ranked, graded or tested. Intercultural competence is not about understanding the well-known dogmas which have been applied to this field.

Intercultural competence can be achieved by following a very individual learning pathway which can take a lifetime. Cultures shift and change, they evolve, they are influenced by factors such as economy and migration. Cultures are not set in stone nor can they be understood as facts and figures to be ticked in a box.

Intercultural competence is defined by what one can learn through respect, interaction, curiosity and humility from others with different backgrounds. Intercultural competence is not a level to be reached, it is a state of mind. Measuring a state of mind is impossible as that state of mind will fluctuate according to the situation, the time, the people involved...

Intercultural competence comes from intercultural learning and intercultural learning comes from the exchange of ideas and the incessant shifts in our cultures.

In Part 3, whenever intercultural learning and competence are mentioned, these terms refer to the above definitions.

## **3. A Framework for Embedding Intercultural Learning in International Organizations**

The European partnership between France, Great Britain, Italy, Spain, Romania and Turkey working on the development of a framework for intercultural learning (FILE) has had to face two essential stumbling blocks, found to exist in every organization, when trying to embed intercultural training:

The first one was how to get management on board to approve and promote intercultural learning, this aspect being the most difficult to study. Using questionnaires and interviews, the analyses of the results led to the conclusion that if top management is not willing to devote the time and money necessary to this endeavour, intercultural learning would either be non-existent or would only consist of buying online exercises or having a “specialist” come to train the personnel a few times a year. If top management is not convinced that this training will have positive and crucially important impacts on the organization (in terms of team building, productivity, efficiency and work environment), then intercultural learning will only be an after-thought in personnel training and will remain in the realm of “soft skills” to be placed way down on the list after management training, intellectual property training and others. The same can be said about learning languages, often considered a waste of time since English is still the lingua franca of international entities.

The second one was which framework (and not concept or theory) could be devised in which intercultural learning could take place in any situation and in any organization.

The results of our 2 year project and study are not final yet but will be in September 2012. But so far what appears to be a relevant framework is one in which:

- All the personnel of the organization is involved and aware of the intercultural learning program and has been informed of its importance and impact. Thus the communication strategy adopted when launching such a training program is essential if participation and motivation are to be high.
- The trainers have been trained themselves in their role as facilitators and no longer as dispensers of truths (or in some cases non-truths).
- The allocation of time has been studied and measured. Intercultural competence, as stated above, cannot be reached after one or two training sessions. It is a constant learning experience.
- Intercultural competence is measured over time and by using “human experiences” such as the improved efficiency of a certain team or the improvement in communication during meetings, and this over time, meaning years. This is a measure which can only be gauged over longer periods and by taking an initial benchmark in order to compare results.

- Intercultural learning and competence are recognized as an inherent part of the mission and vision statement of the organization
- The learning process touches everyone from top to bottom and from bottom to top, excluding all forms of hierarchy and subordination
- The learning process is based on the learners' experiences.

#### 4. Conclusion

It is too often forgotten that “going global” does not simply mean being present in different countries and negotiating contracts worldwide: “going global” also means being able to function effectively in international environments and having enough knowledge about others to navigate the sometimes troubled waters of working in international teams.

Never have there been so many books, articles and studies focused on the people in organizations. The human dimension in management strategies has never been found to be so important. The last decades have proven that intercultural competence is a key competence for those working in international teams. The issue now is how to define that competence, how to build that competence into people and how to have it recognized.

If there is one single concept to be remembered in our attempts to embed intercultural learning, it is that of constant learning. This may seem unrealistic in these times of digital speed and technological efficiency but the notion of time is of the essence. Intercultural learning and competence are based on time and experience. One cannot imagine becoming intercultural competent in a week or less. This is unrealistic.

What is realistic is to take a long-term view on intercultural training and not adopt the short-term approach. We have all spent years being educated. That is how we obtained our jobs, built our lives and our careers. How could we possibly become competent in this domain in a few hours?

Intercultural competence reached through intercultural learning in an international learning organization should be dependent on the people living the experiences and not on often-mentioned strategies and “how to” kits.

Embedding intercultural learning in international organizations is our challenge today if learning is to be at all relevant to our world.

#### 5. Acknowledgements

My thanks go to those who have worked with me and supported my actions on this endless journey:

- Emmanuelle Bellange, Head of the Welcome Office, Agence Iter France, CEA France
- Jerome Pamela, Director of Agence Iter France, CEA France
- All the partners in the FILE project:
- Ben Charles and Elina Kumpina, Enfield Council, United Kingdom
- Betty Canova and Valeria Cirillo, Spehia-Fresia, Rome, Italy
- Dan Stan, Technical University of Cluj-Napoca, Romania
- Juan Carlos Suarez, Seville University, Spain
- Sertan Cinar, Aydin Provincial Directorate of National Education EU Office, Turkey
- Ingrid Baraniak, Rose Ofori and Caroline Garrido, Welcome Office, Agence Iter France, CEA France

#### 6. References

- [1] Geert Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values*. Beverly Hills CA: Sage Publications, 1980
- [2] Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, Michael Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. 3rd Edition, McGraw-Hill USA, 2010
- [3] Stella Ting Toomey, *Communicating Across Cultures*, Guilford Publications
- [4] Edward T. Hall *Beyond Culture*, 298 pp. Anchor Books/A Division of Random House, Inc., 1976, 1981
- [5] Bennett, Milton J. "Towards a Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity" in R. Michael Paige, ed.

Education for the Intercultural Experience. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1993

- [6] Jeremy Comfort and Peter Franklin, “ The Mindful International Manager: How to Work Effectively Across Cultures”, published by Kogan Page, London, Philadelphia and New Delhi, January 2011
- [7] Shawn Simpson, “The Intercultural Approach to Learning: from the Ethics of Respect to the Learning Organization of the Future”, ICERI 2010 Conference Proceedings, Madrid, Spain
- [8] Shawn Simpson, “ Cultural Fusion: ITER, the nascent intercultural organization”, Interculturalism, Meaning and Identity, A Diversity and Recognition Project, March 2011 Conference in Prague, Czech Republic