

# Some Thoughts on Assessing Intercultural Competence

## Blog Post – National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

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Intercultural competence is emerging as an important competency, not only within the United States but also around the world. It is especially relevant to employability, the increasing diversity of the world in which we live, and the pressing global challenges confronting us as humans. While other terms represent intercultural competence -- global citizenship, cultural intelligence, global learning, and so on -- they all infer the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to interact successfully with others from different backgrounds. The focus on intercultural competence is growing out of the internationalization movement which is becoming more central in many colleges and universities, and is driven by economic and social factors. Intercultural competence is often stated as one of the main goals of study abroad experiences, as well as of internationalized curricula. In the U.S., intercultural competence is seen as key to global workforce development and foundational to 21<sup>st</sup> century skills.

What exactly is intercultural competence? Can it be assessed and if so how? Over the past half century, a considerable amount of scholarship has been produced on the concept of intercultural competence and its varying terms. In fact, Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) discussed more than 20 different definitions and frameworks. In 2006, the first research-based definition of intercultural competence appeared (Deardorff, 2006) followed by a synthesis of work published in the *Sage Handbook of Intercultural Competence* (2009) and a subsequent growing list of publications on this topic, not only in the US but also in many other countries around the world. Various conferences focus on this topic as well, including a recent Intercultural Learner Conference at Duke University and the upcoming international Association of International Educators (NAFSA) conference in San Diego in May 2014.

From all of this, several themes emerge:

1. Intercultural competence is a complex, broad learning goal and must be broken down into more discrete, measurable learning objectives representing specific knowledge, attitude or skill areas.
2. The attainment of intercultural competence is a lifelong developmental *process* which means there is no point at which one becomes fully interculturally competent.
3. Language fluency is necessary but in itself insufficient to represent intercultural competence.
4. Intercultural competence must be intentionally addressed throughout the curriculum and through experiential learning (such as study abroad, service learning, and so on).
5. Faculty need a clearer understanding of intercultural competence in order to more adequately address this in their courses (regardless of discipline) and in order to guide students in developing intercultural competence.

These emerging themes point to five implications for assessment of intercultural competence. The first is using the extant literature to define the concept. Intercultural competence is broadly about

communication and behavior that is both *effective* and *appropriate* in intercultural interactions (and all interactions can be considered to be intercultural).

Second, research results indicate that intercultural competence can, indeed, be assessed (Deardorff, 2011; Fantini, 2009; Stuart, 2009). The 140+ existing assessment tools are predominantly self-report instruments, which means only “half of the picture” is measured. What is often missing in intercultural competence assessment (at least in education and the humanities) is the other half of the picture – the *appropriateness* of communication and behavior, which according to research studies, can only be measured through *others’* perspectives, beyond self-report.

Third, most assessments of intercultural competence focus on *results* instead of *process* (i.e., how one *approaches* others, reflects critically and thinks interculturally), relying on indirect evidence only (often a survey instrument) which provides an incomplete picture of an individual’s intercultural competence development. The American Association of Colleges and Universities provides a sample rubric (based on the intercultural competence framework from my research, as well as based on Bennett’s Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity) for measuring direct evidence of intercultural learning - keep in mind, though, that even this rubric does not capture the full complexity of intercultural competence and thus rubrics must be developed that are aligned with specific learning objectives within intercultural competence development. For more on this, see *The Sage Handbook of Intercultural Competence*, (Deardorff, 2009) as well as a forthcoming book on assessing intercultural learning outcomes (Stylus).

Fourth, intercultural competence assessment must involve a multi-method, multi-perspective approach that is focused more on the process of intercultural competence than on an end result (Deardorff, 2012; Deardorff & Edwards, 2012; Gordon & Deardorff, 2013). Examples of how intercultural competence is currently being assessed include through embedded course assessment, self-report instruments, reflection papers, critical incident analysis, interviews, observations (by professors, internship supervisors, host families, group members, etc), simulations and longitudinal studies. While it is encouraging that more institutions are assessing intercultural competence outcomes, there is much work that needs to be done on improving intercultural competence assessment and as such, there are currently no examples of “best” practices.

Fifth, it is essential to determine whether students can *think and act interculturally* (Bok, 2006). For example, are students living an intercultural lifestyle? Are students interculturally successful in their actions and interactions with others?

When all is said and done, the goal is to collect *evidence* of intercultural competence development and to use that information to guide students in their intercultural journey as well as for program improvement. In this sense, assessing intercultural competence is about much more than assessing a complex learning outcome, it’s about developing an essential lifelong competence.

#### Resources

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