Defining, Assessing, and Researching Intercultural Competence


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The purpose of international education is often defined as fostering cross-cultural understanding among peoples from disparate nations. At an individual level, the skills, behaviors, and attitudes that make up this complex area of expertise are known by the frequently ill-defined phrase “intercultural competence.” *The Sage Handbook of Intercultural Competence* seeks to clarify this concept and is a welcome compendium of new writings on the topic. In its comprehensive approach and the eminence of its contributors, it is a worthy addition to earlier classics of the field, such as Sage’s *Handbook of Intercultural Training* (Landis, Bennet, and Bennet 2003) and the two-volume *Intercultural Sourcebook* (Fowler and Mumford 1995). This hefty handbook is organized thematically into three sections: Conceptualizing Intercultural Competence, Applying Intercultural Competence, and Research & Assessment in Intercultural Competence.

**Conceptualizing Intercultural Competence**

As befits a compendium of this sort, the section on conceptualization is the longest of the three, comprising fourteen authoritative chapters. Spitzberg and Chagnon’s introductory chapter briefly describes the emergence of intercultural competence as a scholarly field, dating to the post-WWII search for global stability and the development of intercultural training approaches for the then-fledgling U.S. Peace Corps. Next is a catalog of frameworks used to represent the concept. Apart from the well-known developmental model, arguably the most widely known among international educators, this discussion includes compositional models (i.e. typologies); co-orientational models, which focus on communicative mutuality; adaptational models, which represent the process of mutual adjustment; and causal models, which focus on paths and outcomes. Five very readable chapters describing each framework in greater depth follow this introduction.

Of equal, if not greater, merit are the remaining chapters, which bring much-needed new voices to the table. In them, scholars of non-Western heritage contribute African, Arab, Chinese, Indian, and Latin American perspectives on the evolving core concepts of intercultural competence. Several of these discussions, not surprisingly, offer a well-founded critique of the emphasis on individual intercultural competence that infuses many North American international education offices and much of the literature.
Applying Intercultural Competence

The handbook’s second section explores the influence of intercultural theory on a variety of professional fields, thus offering multiple viewpoints on the concept of competence. Many NAFSA members will gravitate toward the chapters on language learning and on international education administration, and rightfully so: Byram is a renowned applied linguist whose work is too seldom read on the U.S. side of the pond; while Paige and Goode, using the concept of cultural mentoring as a launching point, offer a cogent and practical argument for the importance of a theory-driven approach to professional international education practice.

It should not be supposed, however, that the perspective from other professions is of lesser relevance to NAFSA members. The chapter by Grandin and Hedderich, in particular, is an excellent introduction to recent efforts by engineering educators to define the globally competent engineer; it should be required reading for all U.S. education abroad offices who have struggled to get more science students to study abroad. Similarly, international educators can bolster their arguments about the need for intercultural competence in a globalizing economy through a careful contemplation of the chapters by interculturalists in human resources, business, social work, religious organizations, health care, and the training of secondary school teachers.

Research & Assessment in Intercultural Competence

Outcomes assessment has been important to U.S. higher education since the creation of the first accreditation agencies in the 1880s, and scholarly efforts to measure the language-learning outcomes of U.S. international education programs date back to at least the mid-twentieth century. The final chapters in this handbook consider the relatively new phenomenon of assessing efforts to instill intercultural competence in students and professionals. For most NAFSA members, this section will be seen as the “practical” one, with cogent analysis by Fantini of the merits of several assessment tools and an exposition of the well-known “SMART” method of objectives definition, which Deardorff uses to elucidate common pitfalls of poorly planned assessment. Likewise, Van de Vijver and Leung’s discussion of experimental research techniques and the questionable validity of cross-cultural causal inferences should be read by all NAFSAns who aspire to produce meaningful assessment and research.

For education abroad professionals, the jewel of the section will undoubtedly be the Paige and Vande Berg chapter on the influence of intercultural theory on U.S. education abroad practice. Brilliantly conceived, it offers six vignettes that serve to illuminate the historical evolution of scholarship in education abroad. It is, therefore, the unfortunate duty of this aficionada of both scholars to report that this jewel is something of a Hope Diamond: unique, scintillating, and well worthy of admiration, but not entirely flawless. A central tenet of this chapter is the idea that, as these applied research projects demonstrate, intercultural learning is often hit-or-miss unless it is also accompanied by a learner-centered or cultural mentoring approach. Since, as the opening chapter of this handbook notes, much of the foundational research on intercultural competence had its roots in the founding of the Peace Corps, it is
unfortunate that Paige and Vande Berg’s examples do not include any of the several field-based education abroad providers who have, since the 1960s, developed the Peace Corps’ learner-centered and culturally mentored pedagogy into a plethora of innovative “experiential” study abroad programs.

To clarify then, the genius of the international educators who are profiled in this chapter was not, as some readers may incorrectly deduce, in having incorporated intercultural training techniques into education abroad programs (that rubicon was crossed in the early 1960s), rather, their collective masterstroke was the realization that much of what passed for “immersion” in education abroad programs was, in fact, as Engle and Engle famously declared in 2002, “neither international nor educative.” Therefore, by having the courage and integrity to use their own programs as an educational laboratory for theory-grounded research, these scholars have broken ground for the oft-marginalized experiential pedagogy to gain credibility as a best-practice model for teaching intercultural competence.

Summary

The Sage Handbook of Intercultural Competence is an excellent resource, as it sets out to be. It does not, as so many edited volumes tend to do, fall prey to “potluck supper syndrome” (too many talented cooks bringing minutely different versions of the same dish to a groaning table), for which Deardorff is to be amply commended. It brings new voices to the discussion and conceptualization of intercultural competence, and, for NAFSA members in particular, it serves as ample evidence that our raison d’être is becoming equally important to professionals outside the world of higher education.

References

