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## **FOSTERING INTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITY IN A DIVERSE ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT**

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### **Introduction**

At present time, the problem of intercultural sensitivity as well as its impact on a student personality has become of a great interest to scientific community. In today's globalized world, the intercultural communication has become more important than ever. Globalization has shown a connection between people from diverse cultural backgrounds in every aspect of modern life. Being sensitive to cultural differences is crucial to would-be professionals' ability to participate successfully and effectively in intercultural communication.

A diverse academic environment is an essential component of building a productive and successful learning experience. In this context, the exposure to diversity, particularly in a university setting, becomes extremely crucial for both students and staff.

The Ukrainian higher education system has developed into a diverse institutional landscape. Ukrainian universities welcome international students from various countries and offer them a wide range of academic programmes to study along with the local and foreign peers. Thus, students with diverse cultural background might expect some challenges in intercultural communication while pursuing their studies. Living and studying in a new cultural and academic environment requires students to learn how to communicate and socialize, forge relationships with multicultural student community, and define Ukrainian culture that has its own distinguishing features.

At the same time Ukrainian students have a unique opportunity to enrich their own culture and develop understanding of other nations, to respect each other's differences, and make connections. They will be better able to enjoy more meaningful interaction with other students coming from different parts of the globe.

Cultural diversity also enables students to learn about mentality and lifestyle that differ from their own. Students become more culturally aware in a multicultural academic environment. This is one of the essential 21st century skills that is a key competence in the modern globalized world.

Culture is the schema around which an individual constructs their identity. It shapes the way people engage with the world, the perspectives they take, and the expectations they have. It shapes the ability to look beyond individual's own point of view, so that they can recognize how other people may think or feel about something.

### **Research Objectives**

The present paper addresses the important issue of enhancing university students' intercultural sensitivity which might facilitate overcoming cultural barriers related to intercultural communication and its effects on communication behavior. In accordance

with the nature of the study, the following research objectives were defined: i) to explore the importance of intercultural sensitivity in intercultural communication; ii) to develop efficient and workable strategies for fostering intercultural sensitivity in a diverse academic environment.

## **Literature Review**

### ***What Is Intercultural Sensitivity?***

To comprehend what intercultural sensitivity is, it is necessary to grasp the meaning of the concept of culture and intercultural competence first. Chamberlain (2005) defined culture as “values, norms, and traditions that affect how individuals of a particular group perceive, think, interact, behave, and make judgments about their world” (p. 197). Chen and Starosta (2000) noted that intercultural competence incorporates three essential and related constructs of intercultural competence: intercultural sensitivity, intercultural awareness, and intercultural skills. Further, they emphasized that intercultural sensitivity shapes the affective component of intercultural competence.

Intercultural sensitivity refers to an individual’s capacity to understand and appreciate cultural differences. Viewed in this light, intercultural sensitivity encompasses a person’s ability to accept and send positive emotional indicators in the process of intercultural communication and interaction. Positive emotional indicators and responses help to advance students’ acceptance and respect of cultural differences and nuances, acknowledge the extent to which culture is embedded in individuals’ daily lives.

Intercultural awareness is related to the expertise to understand the way culture determines thinking, behavior, and the ability to practice in intercultural communication. In addition, Hånberg & Ödterdahl (2009) considered the importance of self-awareness in intercultural sensitivity education. They highlighted that intercultural sensitivity education should include self-awareness construction because cultural understanding of similarities and differences are referred to a person’s home culture (Hånberg & Ödterdahl, 2009). Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss (1975, p. 522) pointed out that “increased awareness of the self is both a tool and a goal”.

Intercultural sensitivity is a set of skills that enables individuals to learn about and understand people who are different in their beliefs, attitudes, and behavior. Intercultural skills refer to the capability to embrace and adapt to different cultural situations. Self-experience shapes the personality, individual views and values.

As the result of their research, Chen and Starosta (2000) developed Intercultural Sensitivity Scale which represents an assessment tool for measuring intercultural sensitivity as an affective component of intercultural communication competence. Earlier to their study, Bennett (1986, 1993, 2004) created the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS).

### ***The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity***

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) explains how people experience and employ cultural differences. Chen (2010) highlighted the impact of intercultural sensitivity on ethnocentrism and intercultural communication

apprehension. Cultural sensitivity confronts ethnocentrism and involves intercultural communication. Obviously, multicultural communication is a two-way street, where people from both cultures are trying to set right their interaction.

Consequently, intercultural sensitivity can be characterized as “an individual’s ability to develop emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promotes appropriate and effective behavior in intercultural communication” (Chen & Starosta, 1997, p. 5).

Bennett (1984, 1986) argued that intercultural sensitivity is a developmental process. Six stages are entangled in this transformational process: denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation, and integration. In regard to Bennett's DMIS, Cushner, McClelland, and Safford (2012, p.155) indicated that cultural awareness is accompanied by improved cognitive sophistication.

Moreover, Bennet (2011) underlined that each stage represents a cognitive structure that is communicated through attitudes and behaviors. Every individual is struggling with their cultural sensitivity, and this model helps a student to go forward to the next stage.

Bennett's DMIS demonstrates the developmental continuum that proceeds from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism. The model defines the typical ways in which people perceive, decipher, and communicate in a framework of cultural variety and differences. The model has been used as an educational tool to facilitate students to gain knowledge and understanding of cross-cultural differences, for example, to value existing differences.

Bilsky et al. (2011) and Schwartz et al. (2012) detailed their discussion with the analyses of the rating of diverse values. According to their research, the structure of values that individuals expressed is virtually identical across more than 80 countries. Nevertheless, Schwartz (1992) further specified diverse values in his theory of basic human value. According to his theory, all values have common features, and they only distinguish in the type of goal or motivation that people have. In this regard, to understand cultural values, students should know the nuances about the values of a specific cultural context and be able to apply this knowledge in a particular setting.

Knowledge and understanding of what represents culture enhances intercultural sensitivity. The well-known and most cited model of culture is the iceberg model. The Cultural Iceberg Model was introduced by anthropologist Edward T. Hall in the 1970s which serves as an analogy for the cultural codes that are prevalent in different societies. According to this model, only some aspects of culture can be obvious to people, while a large portion of them is latent. Here comes the analogy of the model with the iceberg where only the top is visible to everyone, but the bottom part hides underneath the water.

Taking into consideration the above-mentioned studies, the conclusion can be made that intercultural sensitivity is the ability of a person to see beyond the tip of the iceberg, a small part of a larger situation, and try to understand the aspects of culture that are hidden but constitute the basic and essential part of the national culture, i. e. beliefs, customs, norms, and values shared by a nation or community.

### **Discussion and Results**

The study revealed that there is the need for developing and enhancing cultural sensitivity among university students. The present study helped to obtain valuable insights to better understand diverse academic environment.

Intercultural competence is based on the would-be professionals' awareness and consciousness of their own cultural identity, as well as the cultural identity of others, "the ability to address and respond to diversity, i.e., to put oneself in another's shoes, to see through someone's eyes." (Gladushyna, 2020, p. 33).

However, Rudd & Lawson (2007) specified the term of intercultural competence. In their opinion, in our globalized environment, it is impossible to stay isolated from other cultures. When we start interacting with people from different cultural background, our communication might become more challenging. Rudd & Lawson (2007) went further and stated that the cognitive aspect of intercultural communication is important, however, the affective component is crucial for the effective intercultural interactions.

The world becomes smaller, the modern world is 'shrinking'. Thus, intercultural sensitivity, deep knowledge, empathy, and understanding culture of others is imperative in a cosmopolitan world. The concept of intercultural sensitivity has become progressively relevant both in the academic life and workplace. Intercultural sensitivity trainings are organized for students and employees as well.

Thus, there are a lot of different strategies to create diverse learning experience in academic environment. For example, open discussions, presentations about cultural traditions, national holidays, national cuisine, styles of dress, family traditions, just to name a few. According to Bannon et al. (2003), the knowledge of a culture is only helpful if it can be put into context. If students are exposed to diversity, it fosters an environment where differences are accepted and understood.

Enhancing intercultural awareness and sensitivity is of great importance to consider all the different aspects of culture that can influence students' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. Student populations are diverse. Jones and McLean (2012) posited that the potential for meaningful learning that is learner-centered may exist when diversity is incorporated. Diversity is acknowledging that people have different identities, different experiences, different cultural norms, causing different behavior.

Finally, intercultural sensitivity helps young people to break down cultural barriers and build cultural bridges. As a result, students enrich their own model which is based on their own life and learning experience. It helps understand otherness, other peoples' feelings, the way of thinking, and behavior. As outlined by Bannon et al. (2003), an individual is ready to decide how best to channel their own feelings, modify their own thinking, and adapt their own behavior to fit and be effective in intercultural communication.

Yet, Feng (2009) admitted that the most difficult part of being culturally sensitive is shifting one's own thoughts and actions, to best expose and position oneself to others.

The differences and the similarities between the cultures can be deeper understood and recognized within the framework of special programmes and trainings in a diverse academic environment.

An extensive study conducted in 1990 on the effectiveness and impact of cross-cultural training showed a positive correlation between cross-cultural training and development of greater feelings of well-being and self-confidence (Black & Mendenhall, 1990). It is necessary to prioritize implicit bias towards students training to set the seal on cultural sensitivity. Implicit bias refers to opinions or stereotypes that drive individuals' actions and decisions. Implicit bias lives in individuals subconsciously, and it can be rather difficult to observe. By prioritizing implicit bias training, it becomes possible to support development of cultural sensitivity. When individuals acquire a deeper understanding of other cultures, they can compare the common features and discern the differences between their own culture and a new one, and thus readjust their opinions and actions in order to effectively communicate with people from that culture.

Grasping cultural sensitivity and awareness helps students to understand how cultural differences may affect individuals when forming their unique personalities, perceptions, beliefs and attitudes, and their interactions with others.

### **Conclusion**

In our modern diverse society, it is more important than ever to implement culturally responsive instruction in academic environment in order to train students to adapt and successfully interact in a multicultural setting.

Diversity enriches the educational experience. Broadening knowledge of cultural diversity helps students to respect various cultural and social backgrounds, and thus prepares them to become global citizens. It allows them to find similarities between different cultures that appeal to them and resonate with their own background. Students become more emphatic, more open-minded, they feel more confident and comfortable in their interaction with others.

Developing cultural sensitivity enables students to improve their collaboration, communication, and critical thinking skills through mutual projects, round table discussions, comparative studies of cultures, participation in social and cultural life of higher educational institutions. Having experience in intercultural communication and being culturally sensitive, would-be professionals can work and study at their most effective levels in modern intercultural academic and working environment. To become an active and inspired global citizen, an individual must be culturally sensitive and culturally competent.

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