

INTRODUCING THE MULTICULTURAL COMPETENCE TO UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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***Abstract:** The paper analyses the possible definitions of cultural competence taking into account the multicultural characteristic of higher education and of the e-learning environments. It also considers some modalities to make students aware of the importance of becoming culturally competent, as it is one of the main requirements on the job market. It is essential that teachers and instructors should also include the skills to become culturally competent in their curricula. In this respect, teachers have been increasingly preoccupied with culturally-based adaptive education, especially those involved in online learning environments. The paper explores the literature connected to this topic, focusing on relevant conclusions that could be used for future research. The present study also takes into consideration 'the other side', analyzing the feedback from a group of university students who were part of a Business Communication course that integrated aspects of multicultural competence in the curriculum. During the course, various dimensions of culture and cultural differences were identified in order to introduce students to potential situations that could require them to be (multi)culturally competent. Finally, we address the challenges faced both by university teachers and students and we suggest how cultural issues should be solved instead of avoiding them. Some solutions refer to developing culturally appropriate communication, directly addressing critical cultural differences, and last but not least, modifying the educational curricula and process.*

***Keywords:** cultural identity, diversity, multicultural education*

The multicultural competence requirement

Multiculturalism and the acceptance of diversity have become major issues since the world was defined as a global village and since the “story of our times” reflected “an increasingly interconnected world where concepts that appear to be unrelated actually are related” (Johansson 2006 21). The mobility of people across cultures and countries has caused a “rise of intersections” (Johansson 2006:21). Defining multiculturalism and putting it from theory into practice are two crucial points on official agendas. Nowadays, multicultural competence is a requirement in fields such as literature, arts, health care, education and even business – especially for human resources, and governmental agencies. One of the most circulated definitions of multicultural competence refers to the “ability to understand, communicate with and effectively interact with people across cultures” or with different social and economic backgrounds Martin, Vaughn 2007: 31).

Multicultural competence is a process that can be developed over many years, depending on the geographical space and on people's mentality, as society has to evolve so that multiculturalism can go from theory to practice.

Multicultural competence has also been defined as "the ability in personal and professional contexts to interact respectfully and effectively with diverse individuals and groups in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth, and protects the rights and dignity of all" (Vernooy, Harris 2010: 2).

Cultural competence is strongly related to culture, which can be seen as a frame of reference for each individual perception of the world. Thus, culture influences traditions, beliefs, experience, education and social status. In this respect, multicultural competence implies having the ability to recognize different cultures, understand their values and appreciate differences. Although communities are not bias-free, efforts should be made to implement the idea that no culture is superior to another.

Multicultural competence can also be defined as "a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes and policies that come together as a system, agency or among professionals and enable that system, agency or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations" (Cross 1989:13).

A more complex definition sees cultural competence as a "developmental process that evolves over an extended period. Both individuals and organizations are at various levels of awareness, knowledge and skills along the cultural competence continuum" (Borrego, Johnson 2012).

The fact that multicultural competence has been described in a variety of definitions, using various concepts and frameworks can be explained by the diversity of cultures within a community and the variety of domains that require this type of competence.

North American countries have been using this concept since the 1950s, whereas Western European countries have focused upon multiculturalism in the late 1960s. However, Eastern European countries have only been interested in this component since the beginning of the 21st century. In Romania, some steps have been made towards introducing this competence in education, health care and business sectors starting with the year 1991 when several waves of refugees coming from countries at war have entered the Romanian communities. Although Romanian universities have been dealing with foreign students for a longer period of time, the tendency was to integrate them into Romanian communities rather than acknowledge diversity and appreciate difference. Unfortunately, there have also been cases of discrimination and isolation of certain ethnically and culturally diverse groups.

As the diversity of students in universities is continually increasing, understanding and integrating the multicultural competence into the curriculum becomes compulsory.

Components of the multicultural competence

Some researchers consider that the multicultural competence comprises three components: *awareness, knowledge and skills* (Pedersen 2007:10), whereas more recent literature speaks about four components, adding *attitude* to the list.

Awareness refers to an individual's position within a certain community and how it affects the individual's values, beliefs, assumptions and behaviour towards the others. It also implies understanding how an individual's point of view may result in a type of behaviour that affects the others. Awareness can be simply defined as the ability of understanding difference.

The *knowledge* component refers to learning specific information about different cultures, about the self and the individuals who are different from the self. However, acquiring knowledge about (in)equality, rights or exclusion and inclusion is not sufficient and may prove to be inconsistent with both individual and collective behaviors.

The third component focuses on the *skills* to communicate with people from different cultures. Both verbal and non-verbal communication is fundamental when interacting with people from cultures different from our own. It is essential to identify and discuss differences, although communication skills vary from culture to culture.

Finally, the *attitude* component underlines the difference between acquiring knowledge, increasing awareness and training for communicating with the cultural other, in order to reconsider and redefine the individual's own values and behaviours about difference.

These four components of multicultural competence should be integrated across curricula so that students should have the knowledge and the skills to recognise otherness. Moreover, students should manifest a positive attitude towards the different cultural other.

Achieving multicultural competence

Firstly, multicultural competence, understood as the manifestation of respect and recognition of cultural values that are different from the self's cultural values, can be achieved by becoming aware of "personal and culturally learned assumptions or biases" (Corey, Schneider 2011). Although comprehension of the cultural other is also influenced by biases, identifying

them is an essential step towards introducing this competence in educational processes. Thus, students may be engaged in activities that should encourage them to recognize misconceptions and manage commonly held beliefs, in order to become culturally competent.

Secondly, an important movement towards achieving cultural competence is to increase knowledge about particular cultures. In this respect, direct contact with members of a culturally different community is the key to make students more aware of diversity. Language may be a barrier and communication may be hindered by nonverbal-signs that can be misinterpreted. That is why, students should learn about different cultures.

Thirdly, interaction is a means to facilitate comprehension of the cultural other. When it is appropriate, students may take part in various traditional events that can improve communication.

Universities should incorporate multicultural competence in curricula and should take into consideration the so-called teaching-to-transform process. Transformative teaching is based on acquired knowledge and skills and is aiming to encourage a positive attitude towards the cultural other. At the same time, it stimulates *critical thinking* as a new component of the multicultural competence. Critical thinking can be defined as a combination between awareness of the self and of the other and the ability to acquire knowledge about the other being as bias-free as possible.

Integrating the multicultural competence in the curriculum

The integration of the multicultural competence in Romanian curricula is not an easy task, especially since the four components are also part of the transformative teaching process.

Nevertheless, we have started to integrate them in the University curricula due to the fact that business students manifested interest in working for multinational companies or for managers with different cultural background. That is the main reason why we have designed communication courses which are meant to offer students the opportunity to discuss a variety of issues that influence their behavior towards different cultures. These issues include race, gender, age, language, ability and disability, social and economic status, religion, national origin, sexual identity.

One of the activities that I have designed in order to make students aware of the importance of the multicultural competence is the following: First of all, students are given list of names and they should guess the nationality and the gender of a person with that name. Secondly, they are offered images of both men and women and they have to give those images an identity. Then, students are asked to make a description of that person based on their

perception of a certain culture, taking into consideration the following categories: age, social status, economic status, educational background, religion, nationality, abilities or disabilities. This type of activity raises awareness of how individuals perceive the others and also offers feedback on their knowledge about other cultures. Students' skills and attitudes may be improved or even altered after receiving feedback, so that their ability to become part of a team and accept diversity should be put into practice.

The reality of the labour market requires students – as future employees - to be culturally competent, due to the fact that companies create their own organizational culture. Organizational culture generally promotes interaction and communication among individuals with various backgrounds, which means it is essential to have the skills to identify and understand the cultural other. An employee who is culturally competent may also adapt in a natural manner to unexpected events. The ability to learn from different cultures and to empathise with the cultural other is always appreciated within a team as it leads to creativity and innovations (Borrego, Johnson 2012).

In this respect, multicultural education should be included in all universities and it should go beyond the accumulation of knowledge and raising awareness. Reconsidering individual attitudes and working on individual skills is essential when speaking about culturally competent students who will become employees, managers, mentors, health care providers, etc. Education providers will have a major role in the near future as more and more culturally different people inhabit the same territory. Although the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, declared that “the approach [to build] a multicultural [society] and to live side-by-side and to enjoy each other... has failed, utterly failed” (Merkel 2010), we must remember that by integrating the multicultural competence in education and in various curricula there is the possibility to change attitudes and behaviours both of teachers and students, both of the self towards the other and of the other towards the self.

Conclusions

The multicultural competence is a highly debated issues and whether it will be successful or not remains for the future generations to judge. However, the four components of this type of competence: awareness, knowledge, skills and attitude – to which we have added critical thinking as a fifth component, are essential in various fields and sectors. In a multicultural society, teams are created and diversity is managed in a positive way. Culturally diverse communities imply more than race and ethnicity. Finally, universities behave

as a community, receiving various students with different backgrounds, while integrating culturally diverse students remains a challenge.

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