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Becoming Intercultural:
Inside and Outside the Classroom

Edited by

Yau Tsai and Stephanie Houghton

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P U B L I S H I N G

Becoming Intercultural: Inside and Outside the Classroom,
Edited by Yau Tsai and Stephanie Houghton

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PART III:
BECOMING INTERCULTURAL
THROUGH EDUCATION

CHAPTER NINE

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND SELF-REFLECTION: TOOLS FOR SELF-ASSESSING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

PRUE HOLMES AND GILLIAN O'NEILL

Current approaches in language teaching emphasise the need for language learners to acquire not just linguistic competence, but also intercultural competence. Yet, there is a compelling need for all students to develop intercultural competence, given the likelihood of their encountering people from other cultures—in the workplace, schools, universities, and elsewhere. However, answering fundamental questions about what intercultural competence is, how it is acquired, and how people know if they have got it continue to challenge researchers (Byram 2009; Deardorff 2009; Holmes 2005, Rathje 2007; Spitzberg and Changnon 2009). In this chapter, drawing on a study we designed for university students taking an advanced intercultural communication course in a management school, we focus primarily on the third of these questions: “How can people know if they are intercultural competent?”¹ First, we present the theory and methodology underpinning the study we designed for our students. Next, we outline the specific model—the PEER model—which the students were required to apply in their study and the processes involved in it. Finally, we show how our interpretations of the data gained from our students’ study helped us to answer the research question.

Developing and Assessing Intercultural Competence: The State of the Art

Recent reviews of intercultural competence indicate the variety of conceptual

¹ How students develop intercultural competence in intercultural encounters, and how they evaluate their competence as a result of their engagement with a cultural other in these encounters, is reported in another study (O’Neill & Holmes, 2007). Student researchers show how the PEER process enabled them to explore, and thus evaluate, their intercultural competence through the intercultural communication experience itself.

and methodological approaches to the phenomenon, as well as a multiplicity of definitions of the term itself (Deardorff 2009; Fantini, 2009; Rathje 2007; Spitzberg and Changnon 2009). For example, Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) note that much of the research and conceptualising to date has focused on the individual. By contrast, Rathje (2007) draws the reader's attention to the role of culture: the place where intercultural individuals draw on their knowledge of their own and the other's culture and construct a third way of sense making and knowing in a third place. However, Deardorff (2009), in her synthesis of the extant literature on intercultural competence, notes the dearth of research, particularly in Western models, that investigates the relational aspect of intercultural competence—where relationship building and dialogue take place between the interactants in the intercultural encounter. Our study seeks to address that gap by focusing on the nature of communication in the intercultural encounter over a period of time, the relationship building that takes place, and how these processes impact an individual's ability to self-assess intercultural competence.

To make sense of these processes, we draw on Byram's (1997; 2008; 2009) notion of the intercultural speaker—the person who is “aware of both their own and others' culturally constructed selves” (quoted in Roberts et al. 2001, 30). This person is able to utilise the skills, tools, and attributes of intercultural competence (the five *savoirs*) to manage communication and interaction with people from other social/cultural groups in daily experience. In further developing the notion of the intercultural speaker, Byram (2008, 68) includes the idea of mediation, between oneself and others. He describes mediation as “being able to take an ‘external’ perspective on oneself as one interacts with others and to analyse and, where desirable, adapt one's behaviour and underlying values and beliefs.” He also notes that mediating requires individuals to act interculturally, which requires a “willingness to suspend those deeper values, at least temporarily, in order to be able to understand and empathise with the values of others that are incompatible with one's own” (69).

Further, we acknowledge the emphasis Byram places on the role of language when individuals are required to act as intercultural mediators (2008). Here he notes that the best mediators are those who have an understanding of the relationship between their own language and language varieties, and those of others. Yet, monoglots too must learn how to act interculturally and mediate between their own and another's language and culture. Therefore, our focus here is on the intercultural competence that individuals require to manage intercultural interactions—the attitudes, knowledge, critical cultural awareness, etc. (those behavioural, cognitive, and affective aspects of the five *savoirs*)—rather than on their linguistic competence.

Intercultural Encounters and Intercultural Dialogue

Knowing the self is an awareness that comes about through knowing others. The intercultural encounter, the place where individuals bring their own socially and culturally constructed world-views and ways of communicating (Kramsch 1998), is an appropriate place to begin assessing one's intercultural competence. Here, individuals experience others' ways of speaking, being, and doing, and may consequently see the relativity of their own culture. Byram (2003) describes this state as analytical awareness, an awareness that encourages further thought on what is worth retaining, and what might be (re)constructed and (re)negotiated in light of intercultural engagement. Individuals are also afforded the opportunity to reflect on their cultural identity, and their own intercultural competence in light of their lived experience and communication with a cultural other. As Clifford (quoted in Jordan 2002) notes, it is in the travelling between cultures, in the crossing of boundaries, where self-interrogation and self-reflection are enacted. Such encounters are where "experiential learning about self and other gets done, where meanings are tried out, [and] where experience slowly becomes understanding" (Jordan 2002, 96). These communicative processes with the cultural other also provide fertile ground for follow-up field notes, diary writing, and reflection.

Intercultural dialogue has been defined as "a process that comprises an open and respectful exchange or interaction between individuals, groups and organisations with different cultural backgrounds or world-views" ("What is Intercultural Dialogue?" 2008). It also includes tolerance and respect for others as new knowledge is related to one's own self-knowledge and values (Byram et al. 2009). But what happens to this emergent new knowledge as it is introduced, (re)considered, and (re)evaluated? Is this new knowledge absorbed, or left in limbo for later (re)consideration and (re)negotiation in light of further reflection and experience? More importantly, how do people make sense of the dialogue and interaction in intercultural encounters, and how do these experiences impact on their own knowledge of their intercultural competence?

In keeping with ethnographic tradition, developing this kind of critical intercultural awareness is predicated on what Jackson (2006, 80) terms "making the ordinary strange," that is, reflecting on behaviour, communication, and interaction that might go unquestioned in one's own community. Such reflection is usually the result of an experience with someone from another culture.

Therefore, an approach that foregrounds critical analysis of and reflection on the intercultural dialogue that takes place in intercultural encounters offers a rich context for individuals to explore the development and self-assessment of their own

intercultural competence.

Autoethnography for Developing and Assessing Intercultural Competence

Engaging students in autoethnography fits within a tradition that offers insights and methods accessible to students doing fieldwork in their own communities (Angrosino 2002; Spradley and McCurdy 1972). More recently, Goodall (quoted in Jordan 2001, 54) speaks of the “new ethnography.” Here, novice (or student) ethnographers, through lived experience, can “rediscover the world” through a process of self-reflexivity leading to fresh understandings of self in relation to the other.

New ethnography has been adapted to contexts where language learners can apply ethnographic methods to encounters (e.g., Jackson 2006; Jordan 2002; Roberts et al. 2001) which, it is claimed, will help to develop their intercultural competence (Byram and Zarate 1997). According to Roberts et al., the process of new ethnography “engages them [students] as people, requires them to reflect upon and analyze how they interact with others. The process is thus both cognitive and affective . . . an engagement with a new social identity which is integral with the acquisition of methods and concepts for reflection and analysis” (239). They further argue that an ethnographic approach assists in the development of intercultural competence. Specifically:

[I]t involves learners in a type of interaction with people of another language and society which makes them conscious of and reflexive about cross-cultural relationships by engaging them directly with the local and the specific. (242)

As we wanted students to capture experiences, reactions, emotions and reflections drawn from their intercultural encounters, we believe that the processes of autoethnography offer an appropriate approach.

Writing the Self: A Model for Self-Assessment of Intercultural Competence

There is no shortage of instruments for assessing intercultural competence (see for example Fantini’s 2009, 466-474, list of 44 assessment tools). However, Fantini warns that, of these instruments, none is adequate for measuring all aspects of intercultural competence: assessment of intercultural competence should be “multidimensional as well as multiperspective [sic], ongoing, integrated, aligned, and intentional” (465), since the process of becoming interculturally competent is

usually longitudinal, ongoing, and developmental (even over a life-time).

Given this proviso, recent developments in assessment have begun to focus more on including the learner in the evaluative process (through self-evaluation, reflection and feedback) and methods that include interviews, observation, and judgment by self and others (Deardorff 2009, Jordan 2001, 2002; Jackson 2006, Roberts et al. 2001). Fantini (2009, 464) notes that these processes result in “better and more varied indicators of progress and attainment of learning objectives,” in this case, developing and self-assessing intercultural competence.

However, where self-assessment of intercultural competence is concerned, there is an absence of models that 1) describe and explain the *process(es)* by which people become interculturally competent, 2) enable individuals to understand how they are developing it, and 3) assess the extent to which they have acquired it. While models that incorporate portfolios, logs, observation, interviews, and performative tasks are generally considered valuable for assessing intercultural competence (Fantini 2009), no study to date has demonstrated how ethnography reveals the processes that underpin individuals’ assessment of their intercultural competence.

It would seem then that written reflections of communication in action—of both self and other—offer a good starting point. However, such descriptive autoethnographic accounts are subject to a number of limitations, especially when enacted and written by novice/student ethnographers. Jordan (2001), for example, states that such accounts are neither objective, neutral, nor definitive. Yet, in the style of Van Maanen’s (1988) confessional tales, they do offer insights into the lived and ordinary everyday experiences of individuals at the level of the intercultural encounter.

The writing up of intercultural and interpersonal experience may be messy, incomplete, partial, and even disconfirming, perhaps even leading to a sense of failure (Jordan 2001). Yet, such writings facilitate understanding of self, an understanding that results from detailed, in-depth analysis of prolonged engagement with a specific cultural other. Notwithstanding critiques of self-indulgence or narcissism, or shortcomings in student ethnographic writing abilities, these accounts are useful for investigating how individuals might develop and evaluate intercultural competence because they reflect the ways in which (cultural, religious, historical, personal) identities are “maintained, modified and transformed” (43).

Methodology: An Approach for Developing and Self-Assessing Intercultural Competence

In this section we first describe the study we designed for our student researchers, and then, the ways in which we drew upon it to answer our research question (How do people assess their intercultural competence?).

The Design of the Students' Study

Drawing on the theoretical and methodological approaches discussed above, we designed an assignment that required students to investigate how they went about developing and self-assessing their intercultural competence (see Appendix 1 for the full assignment details). The students, who were enrolled in an advanced undergraduate intercultural communication course within a management faculty, were required to undertake a research assignment involving ethnographic fieldwork as part of their coursework assessment. The assignment had two key objectives. The first objective was to enable students to gain a better understanding of someone from another culture, and therefore, benefit from the opportunity provided by the diversity on their university campus. The second objective was for them, through that engagement, to assess their intercultural competence.²

Altogether 64 students engaged with the research assignment over two iterations of the course. They included New Zealand students from a range of ethnic groups, and international students primarily from East and South-East Asia. Each of these 64 students was required to find an informant, or cultural other (a student from another culture who was not taking this same course). Each pair of students had to meet for an hour or more at least six times over a six-week period. The student researchers were asked to apply the PEER model (discussed below) to their meetings, and in the subsequent recording of data, as they tried to make sense of their own intercultural encounters. Finally, they wrote a research report which centred on analysis and interpretation of four or five encounters, followed by a reflection on the research experience. The objective here was for the students to assess their intercultural competence in these encounters. The research approach received ethical approval and included participants' consent, protection of anonymity, and respect for confidentiality. It is these reflections, disguised under pseudonyms, which we draw on in this chapter.

The PEER Model

² As with many compulsory tasks in controlled environments—whether class-based research assignments, as in this case, or intercultural training in a multicultural organisation—students' levels of engagement in and commitment to the task, as would be expected, varied. Their experiences, reported in this chapter, present just some of the students' written reflections.

As our research aim was to understand how our students might assess their intercultural competence, we provided them with a model that we believed would facilitate both their exploration of intercultural engagement with a cultural other and reflection on their own intercultural competence. For two reasons, we named this the PEER model. First, we wanted to capture the idea that the two participants in the intercultural encounters were equals. Secondly, we wanted to indicate the processes underpinning the model.

The PEER model consists of four interconnected and interrelated phases: 1) Prepare, 2) Engage, 3) Evaluate, and 4) Reflect. In preparation for the intercultural encounter, students were asked to *bracket* their experience, that is, to foreground any assumptions, prejudices, and stereotypes they might hold about their cultural other, as well as any social and communicative phenomena which might not immediately seem to connect and which might be unexpected (Holliday, Hyde and Kullman 2004). Through this piecing together, they were later able to make connections, or identify dissonances and disjunctures between their own interpretations of intercultural communication events, and those of their cultural other.

Next, students engaged—through experiential learning—with their cultural peer over a period of time and across a range of socio-cultural contexts. They had to arrange six meetings with their cultural other across a range of contexts to create intercultural experience, by which we mean experience which “takes place when people from different social groups with different cultures (values, beliefs and behaviours) meet” (Alred, Byram and Fleming 2002, 233-234). The student researchers were given a list of guiding topics (such as family, education, career aspirations, their home town/country, sporting/leisure interests, holiday/work experiences, etc. (See Appendix 2) which they could use as a basis for conversation during their meetings. They were, however, also encouraged to find their own ways of engaging with their cultural other, e.g., sharing a social activity such as a meal, going to the cinema, meeting in a café, partaking in a sporting activity, etc.

The evaluation phase enabled them to draw on the concepts of (intercultural) communication, culture, and intercultural competence that they had been introduced to in the course. Although students were not required to use these terms and concepts in their written accounts, we wanted to expose them to these concepts for two reasons: to sensitise them to the terms used in understanding and analysing intercultural competence, and to assist them in making more informed interpretations of their experiences and the intercultural competence they displayed in their encounters. Students also drew on their ethnographic data (observation, field notes, diary notes, and personal reflections).

The reflection phase required students to reflect on their encounters critically by drawing on their written notes and experiences. They were asked to note any challenges to their preconceptions about communicating with their cultural other, and any ways in which their communicative competence was somehow revealed, exposed, questioned, and/or challenged, and which thus prompted a (re)construction and/or (re)negotiation of previously taken-for-granted ways of communicating, thinking, and behaving. Utilising reflection upon and sense-making of communicative events, action, and conversations as their primary tools, each student captured a picture of his or her individual lived experience and interculturality.

To some extent, the PEER model embodies aspects of Kolb's (1984) four stages of experiential learning (concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, active experimentation). Kolb noted that the learning cycle can begin at any of the four stages, and it may also be continuous, that is, learners may repeat the learning cycle as many times as they need to. Similarly, the PEER model accommodates this flexibility. The value of this approach (over others that test dimensions, or require Likert scale assessments of intercultural competence) is that it has the potential to be both empowering and emancipatory: it encourages students to critically self-reflect through questioning, emotional involvement and self-discovery. The resulting congruences and dissonances—between their own cultural identities and those of their intercultural other—that emerge in the intercultural encounter enable self-evaluation.

Autoethnographic Writing

The study engaged the student researchers in the following: the recording and analysis of field notes, the writing up of intercultural encounters, and the subsequent personal reflections that emerged. The process is akin to Ellis and Bochner's (2000) autoethnography, which they describe as an autobiographical genre of writing and research whereby the researcher focuses "outward on social and cultural aspects of [his/her] personal experiences" and "inward, exposing a vulnerable self" (739). Researchers create texts which feature "concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self-consciousness," revealed through "action, feeling, thought, and language" (739). In writing their reports, students constructed unique understandings of how to assess their own intercultural competence.

Their reflections also embodied a phenomenological approach—one that encouraged self-conscious examination of "lived experience" through engagement with a cultural other. *Verstehen*—of moving into the mind of the other by way of empathy (Patton 1990)—was also an important resource for this examination. Students were required to use processes of self-reflection that, we hoped, would lead

to critical self-awareness. We were also interested in those things that might limit students to make sense of their intercultural interactions; as a result of unshared culture, worldview, and communication codes and practices.

The Design of our Study

As stated in the introduction to this chapter, our research purpose was to answer the question: “How do people know if they are interculturally competent?” We centred on the data provided by the students’ self-reflections on their intercultural encounters to help us answer this question, looking for examples that illustrated how the students themselves judged their competence in intercultural encounters. We sought “sensitising concepts” that “offer[ed] ways of seeing, organizing, and understanding experience” which might be used as “points of departure from which to study the data” (Charmaz 2003, 259). We then applied Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis approach, looking for themes that identified recurrent, important, significant, and unique episodes, as well as compelling extracts. Our interest lay not only in examples where students judged themselves as competent/successful intercultural communicators, but also in those self-evaluations that described partial, limited, or even failed competence.

Thus, the selected student researchers’ experiences, reported in the findings that follow, demonstrate varieties of engagement, reflection and self-evaluation.

Findings

“We don’t see things as they are, we see them as we are.” Anias Nin (authors’ emphasis)

When it comes to exploring and assessing intercultural competence, the intercultural encounter offers an opportunity to peel back the limiting layers of self and so see ourselves more fully. In this study, the intercultural encounter was also the place where the four elements of the PEER model were brought together to form an interconnected and interdependent process that would, it was hoped, facilitate self-evaluation of intercultural competence.

Reflecting on Self and the Other

The prepare stage is designed to encourage us to first see ourselves *as we are*. It is a crucial part of the self-assessment process. It requires a conscious foregrounding and acknowledgement of our tendency to stereotype, categorise, and judge others according to our own narrow, unquestioned criteria, and also to construct the other as someone totally different from ourselves—a stranger. Such negative perceptions can disincline us to engage with a cultural other, or even create a fear of engagement, as seen in the case of Joe, a Korean New Zealander: “When I was in high school I had a negative stereotype of Maori students who were extremely offensive to Asian students like me. Maoris always scared me with their terrible faces and by sticking out their tongues . . . thus I shunned contact with them. In order to be competent in the intercultural communication with my cultural other, who has [a] Maori background, I had to overcome the feelings of anxiety which had existed in my mind for a long time.”

Scepticism about the value of seeing ourselves through the eyes of others also surfaced at the initial stage: “Before I met with my cultural other, I kept asking myself why I needed to do this research to understand myself better by interviewing [another]. Is there anyone else more clear about if I am interculturally competent than myself?” However, having engaged, evaluated, and critically reflected on her intercultural encounters, Wei Wei concluded: “And now I think I got the answer. I did need my cultural other to refer to and reflect myself from him as a mirror. And through this mirror, I saw a different me.”

Once engagement begins, the PEER process takes on an iterative nature as each fresh encounter calls for evaluation, reflection, and self-reflection, and then further preparation for the next encounter. From then on, it also becomes much less easy for individuals to disentangle the threads of the recurrent phases as the interactions between self and the cultural other develop. Nonetheless, a number of key elements emerged from the data.

Reflecting on Challenge and Discomfort

First, gaining self-knowledge through intercultural interaction is not always straightforward or positive, Mary, a New Zealander reflected:

At times the learning I received and my interaction with my cultural other have been very challenging and uncomfortable. I have found that change is not comfortable. What happened then? Did I want to shut my mind to otherness and different ways of thinking? Yes. The shift in thinking created strain against what was nestled comfortably in the crevices of my mind. But then there came a mixture of wonder

with the reluctance towards my “new view.” The mixture of feelings created a softening towards change, and a gradual acceptance of my new world-view has occurred.

As a result of working through challenge and discomfort, Mary was able to begin the process of loosening the cultural typifications that constrain individuals and restrict their ability to see the relativity of their own cultures. Reflecting finally on her series of intercultural encounters, Mary concluded:

It took me to a new level of awareness of how to relate to others from the place of my own culture. . . . The meetings’ purpose gave us “permission” to enter into a deeper level of conversation, one that I believe was mutually beneficial and enjoyable. We both got to interact and learn from a cultural other. I asked Laila (my cultural other) how she found the meetings, and she said, “This has been like meeting with a friend”. We have become friends.

Reflecting on Difference

As the students moved back and forth through the phases of the PEER process, their fear of difference lessened and they became more accepting of it: “For competence to exist within my interactions with cultural others,” reflected Michaela, a New Zealander, “I must first recognise there will be differences. These differences help form the unique relationships between people of different cultures.” The ability to accept difference was also a source of pleasure, as illustrated by Joe’s reflection: “Once I opened my mind, I felt much easier to accept cultural differences, and also unconsciously established a sentiment of enjoyment . . . I felt like I had become re-socialised and became closer to New Zealand culture.” A newfound ability to tolerate dissonance was often welcomed as a sign of increasing intercultural competence:

This shift [away from a neat categorisation process] created room for a new idea which has been very thought-provoking: one view is not the right view, but only one view. This thought creates a space to stand and look around; a place where I can listen and start to enter into dialogue from. I’m thinking I will grow to enjoy this new space. (Michaela)

Engaging with a cultural other also creates an opportunity to (re)construct and (re)negotiate one’s own views and identity. Ashleigh, a New Zealander, found that her intercultural encounters brought a revelation about her thinking and attitudes to others:

Before I interviewed my cultural other, I did not realise I had many negative views of groups that are different from me. I am beginning to understand that when people have different views to me, it does not mean I have to believe these views as well, I

just have to accept that we view things differently. Before . . . I was viewing people who did not share my views as wrong, which is a highly ignorant perspective. I am very glad that I have reflected on this communication and realised where I have poor intercultural competence. I judged people too quickly and stereotyped people's cultures before taking the time to get to know them. I think I still hold some stereotypical views but I am conscious that I need to change these.

Reflecting on Cultural and Religious Relativity

Religious difference emerged as a particularly challenging aspect of culture. Faith is central to many people's identity and accepting or accommodating religious differences can prove difficult as evidenced by Elena: "I still find it hard to accept people's religion but understand that I do not need to believe what they believe for us to communicate."

Elena's critical insight into the fact that we do not need to agree with people in order to communicate with them was also echoed by Rahima, a Muslim participant in our study. Rahima is an Afghani with New Zealand permanent resident status. She describes herself as well travelled, multilingual, confident in her Muslim identity and dress and interested in others and their cultures. She asserted, however, after much critical reflection that her religion and culture would always influence the degree of comfort and competence she felt when interacting with cultural others:

I believe it is easier for [people in] some cultures and more difficult for [those] in other cultures to become culturally competent . . . Because I hold strong religious beliefs, it often becomes a challenge for me to communicate and interact or perhaps get to a closer relationship with people from other cultures. I do understand that it is interesting for a lot of people to see us with head scarves. And I do appreciate it when somebody asks why we wear it. However, I do get sad when someone intentionally and deliberately tries to insult my religion. The most interesting, or funny thing is when I'm asked if I have hair on my head. I used to laugh and say, of course I do. But one thing that amuses me is how one can think like that. I mean we're all human, chemically, physiologically, biologically the same, but culture provides the different views of the world we have.

Rahima goes on to clarify her position: "Perhaps I could never be competent in this context [social interaction with secularised New Zealand females about clubbing and boyfriends] because that would mean that I have to cross my values, change my behaviour and attitude to be competent." Rahima's reflections here challenge the extent to which people may have to (re)construct or (re)negotiate their (religious, cultural, historical, regional, personal, etc.) identities in order to consider themselves competent. As a result of her self-reflection, Rahima displayed self-enlightenment, acknowledging that she did not need to compromise or abandon

the values and beliefs in which she had been educated and socialised. This position implies that there are limits to adaptability and open-mindedness, and the extent to which people do/do not judge cultural others. Rahima's experience also raises questions regarding the extent to which reconstruction and renegotiation of identity is necessary for intercultural competence, questions to which there are as yet no satisfactory answers.

Exposing a Vulnerable Self

The extent, if any, to which individuals are required to adjust or adapt in order to achieve intercultural competence in their own eyes, or in those of others, is poignantly illustrated in Shanshan's story. As it also reveals how powerfully the intercultural interaction can act upon the individual's sense of self, it is recounted in detail. As Shanshan explores her reactions to her cultural other, Jim, she begins to question his motivation in being so nice to her:

He was honest but not rude and he always worried about my feeling when he quoted his friends' opinion on Chinese students. And he also respected and showed lots of interest to my culture. He always asked my opinion when he suggested something by saying, "What do you think, Shanshan?" And all these things kind of made me feel unreal. Then I began to think, "Is this his true colour or is he trying to give me the right answer to make him look competent?"

In response to her self-questioning she writes:

And I began to ask myself "Why am I having this feeling?" – "Because you are not confident of your own culture, you don't even have the belief of your own culture." I heard this voice and I was so afraid of this reason, as it is the truth that I didn't realise until now and still want to deny. And I continued to ask myself "How does it come that I lost the confidence in my own culture?" I tried so hard to find out where is the beginning of this "culturally lost" and finally I thought there is no reason but my own experiences and my own judgements. I guess the second night of my arriving in New Zealand played an important role on my first impression of how the society feels about our Chinese students. I was walking and tried to familiar[ise myself] with the way back home to my home-stay family. Then a car drove by with the yelling of "You ugly yellow Chinese, go back home!" And somebody threw an egg towards me and it broke on my shoulder. I guess it broke my heart as well at that time. It was something I was really not prepared for or expected.

In her personal reflections, Shanshan confided: "I have never told anybody about this, not even my home-stay family." This unpleasant encounter clearly coloured her subsequent attitudes to intercultural interaction and negatively impacted her sense of her Chinese self. She goes on to say:

I remember that night. I went back home and washed my clothes by myself with sobbing. And I guess this experience made me want to be different from other Chinese as I thought there must be some really bad Chinese here . . . that people would yell that at me.

Thoughts that her Chinese self might be unacceptable in New Zealand were confirmed by her first experience of university life.

When I started my campus life I found that all the Kiwi students were sitting together and Chinese students have their own group. I did not want to sit with Chinese at that time as I assumed that is not good and I didn't dare sit with the Kiwi students as I thought they might dislike me . . . so I always sit at some free place.

Reflecting on her intercultural competence prior to engaging with Jim, Shanshan writes: "I thought I was more competent than others as I was willing to make Kiwi friends and try to connect with the local society. However, after taking this course and meeting Jim and writing this report, I realise that I was not competent at all." She arrives at this conclusion because she now sees her true motivation for wanting to interact with Kiwis: "I did all this to recover the shadow of the breaking egg. I'm sorry to say that – as the song says 'The first cut is the deepest'". The egg incident had so clouded Shanshan's world that it dictated much of her subsequent intercultural behaviour and thinking about her own culture.

In the case of Shanshan, ethnography, coupled with the PEER model for intercultural interaction, did indeed reveal the vulnerable self which we all take into our intercultural encounters. However, Shanshan ultimately judged herself "lucky that she had the opportunity to revalue and re-evaluate" herself: "I found the problem when I engaged with my cultural other, and I know that I need to find myself and have belief in my own culture from now on."

The quest to determine and assess one's intercultural competence is, as shown by the stories of Rahima and Shanshan in particular, a complex yet highly individual one. It begins with an attempt to understand one's own limitations, ethnocentrism, stereotypes and preconceptions and develops in line with a willingness to test and question them through lived experience and critical self-reflection.

Conclusion

As stated at the outset, the aim of this chapter is to show the value of ethnography as a tool for developing and self-assessing intercultural competence. First, at a methodological level, the students' reflections that emerged as a result of this study

show that understanding one's own intercultural competence necessitates a process of ongoing critical reflection and self-reflection. Setting up a process that involves preparation, engagement, evaluation, and reflection—by way of the PEER model—provides a methodology for achieving this goal.

Second, the writing process itself constituted much more than “writing up” the field notes and “writing down” the narrative of personal/cultural experience. The student researchers' examples illustrated that writing became a process of discovery as they drew on texts, notes, presentations, and possibilities. As Shanshan's story illustrates, writing about intercultural competence encouraged “a conscious experiencing of the self as both inquirer and respondent, as teacher and learner, as the one coming to know the self within the processes of research itself” (Lincoln and Guba 2000, 183). This self-reflexive process entails not only interrogation and discovery of the cultural other through intercultural encounters, but also discovery of the self. While open to the criticisms of being produced by novice ethnographers, the resultant student texts did expose their vulnerable, and at times, incompetent selves. As such they are “hybrid,” embodying all the limitations of “anglicised student ethnography code” (Roberts, quoted in Jordan 2001, 53).

Third, at a theoretical level, several outcomes emerge. The student texts offer important insights into the processes of developing and assessing intercultural competence. Students gained a deeper self-knowledge, often leading to a greater understanding of their own critical cultural awareness by 1) moving from a position of complacency to seeing the complexity of communication in the intercultural encounter; 2) noting their emotions as they experienced intercultural communication as pleasure, satisfaction, but also as pain, and communicative inadequacy; 3) experiencing failure through inadequate self-knowledge, but celebrating the success that came of enlightenment and growth as a result of their intercultural communication experiences; and 4) acknowledging that competence does not predicate compromise where values and beliefs must be reconstructed or abandoned.

The intercultural encounter, and the relationships individuals experience within its context, is critical to understanding where intercultural competence resides. Within the intercultural encounter, and by way of the PEER process, individuals monitor and self-assess their competence in interaction with cultural others. Kramsch (1998, 26) argues that the intercultural encounter is about “the way each culture views the other in the mirror of itself”. However, while we may be helped by seeing ourselves in the mirror of the other, the ultimate challenge is to see ourselves as we are. As Celia wrote in her reflection:

I've always assessed my intercultural competence based on the faults I've seen in other people's intercultural communication instead of on my interactions with a cultural other. . . . It caused me to more honestly ask myself the hard questions about

my interactions.

Although this study presents a framework that others could use to assess their intercultural competence, some aspects of intercultural competence itself remain unresolved. For example, Rahima's questioning of her own degree of competence echoes Deardorff's (2009) point that there remains much to discuss and explore about adaptability, what specifically is meant by adaptation, and who adapts to whom and to what degree.

In conclusion, these student autoethnographic self-reflections—imperfect, incomplete, and idiosyncratic as they are—provide a tool or process for developing and self-assessing intercultural competence. Their self-reflections reveal the process as messy, open-ended, and ongoing. There is no one-size-fits-all definition of what constitutes intercultural competence. Further, as our students' reflections demonstrate, there is no single threshold by which individuals may measure the extent of their intercultural competence. If anything, intercultural competence might be described as an openness to self and others, a readiness to tolerate difference, and an ability to maintain an acceptably intact sense of self while also exposing oneself to the risks and challenges resulting from intercultural encounters. Self-reflection, by way of the PEER model, provides the tool for this self-assessment.

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APPENDIX 1

Intercultural Competence Research Report

Purpose

The purpose of this assignment is to learn about and assess your own intercultural competence. You will carry out ethnographic research with a student at (name of campus) who is from another culture. You will identify an appropriate participant, a cultural other, and meet at least five times. The purpose of the meetings is to explore your own intercultural competence as you communicate with this person and come to understand his/her intercultural communication experiences. You will present your findings, analysis and assessment of **your own** intercultural competence (as a result of your encounters with your chosen cultural other) in a self-reflective research report of about 2000 words.

Specifically, the objectives are to:

1. Get a better understanding about someone from another culture, and therefore, benefit from the opportunity provided by the diversity at (name of campus);
2. Develop an understanding of your own intercultural competence (in light of your intercultural communication experiences with your cultural other), and learn how to assess it.

In the course of your meetings with your cultural other you will explore the first and second objectives. In writing the report (about 2000 words), you will address the second objective.

Process

As a researcher, you will engage in the following processes and steps:

Reading

First, you should familiarise yourself with the readings on intercultural competence in your text book and those in the course reader. We will discuss this topic in class as well. You may also need to draw on other concepts and materials discussed throughout the course, e.g., culture, world-view (religion), identity, language, nonverbal communication, etc.

Participant selection

You will choose the cultural other you would like to work with for this research project. Your cultural other must also be a student at (name of campus). If you are a New Zealand student you will need to find an international student from another culture to work with. If you are an international student, you will need to partner with a student who is from New Zealand. You must choose someone you do not already know (i.e., do not choose a friend). Seek my help if you need any assistance in finding a cultural other, or you might ask your classmates to identify one of their friends for this assignment.

Ethics requirements

The research involves collecting information from human subjects. You are, therefore, required to follow the guidelines set out by the (name of university) the right to withdraw from the research at any time, and is not required to answer questions if s/he so desires. Your cultural other must sign the consent form provided to indicate agreement to participate in the research. Please ensure that you submit your signed consent form to me at the time when you web-submit your assignment.

Guiding research questions

- a) To what extent am I interculturally competent in my communication?
- b) How do I assess my intercultural competence (i.e., how do I know I am interculturally competent)?

Collecting data: Keeping a journal

Since the purpose of this research is to assess your own intercultural competence, during the research process you will need to be focusing on your own intercultural competence. Therefore, you will be thinking about and conscious of your own responses and reactions to the topics and experiences you discuss with your cultural other. Record these ideas in a journal (use an exercise book) as you progress through the data collection.

After you have identified your cultural other and introduced him/her to the study, write a brief pen-portrait of this person. Write down any cultural expectations or preconceptions you have or had beforehand about someone from that culture.

You are required to meet with your participant for a minimum of five times. During or immediately after each of your meetings, you must record your encounters

and conversations in your journal.

- Describe briefly what you and your cultural other discussed. Include examples of the dialogue between you, reactions, nonverbal communication, etc.
- Highlight areas of agreement and difference in communication and culture.
- Include any insights gained and reflections noted about your responses and thoughts.
- Record any challenges to your own, or to your cultural other's preconceptions about what is appropriate or effective communication and/or behaviour in the contexts you discuss. Describe what these are. To help you write about these self-reflections, you should draw on understandings of intercultural competence (your own, those discussed in class, and models and examples in the readings).

Interpreting/making sense of the emerging data (analysis)

In talking with your cultural other and in making sense of your own intercultural competence you will be engaging in a process of *thick description* (Geertz 1973), the recording of detail of human life in layers of contextual significance. This process requires you to derive meaning from a broad view of social phenomena and piece together different, interconnected perspectives. It also requires you to explore and make sense of the ongoing emergence of social phenomena, which may not immediately seem to connect and which may be unexpected (Holliday, Hyde & Kullman, 2004, p. 8). Thus, you are making connections between your own interpretations of communication events, as well as the interpretations of your cultural other, and other people's interpretations as well. We will look at this term and how we, as researchers, develop thick description as we progress through the course each week.

Self-reflection

During and at the end of each meeting/interview, and also at the end of the data collection period, you should engage in personal reflection. Think about how you have changed as a result of each meeting and this research project. Reflect upon what you learned about your cultural other, and what you learned about yourself. Continue to ask yourself the following questions:

- a) Am I continuing to hold any preconceptions (stereotypes, ethnocentric views, prejudices) I had about this person? Why/why not?
- b) Am I beginning to modify/adjust/challenge any of these preconceptions?
- c) In what ways are these preconceptions being confirmed or challenged? How? Why?
- d) To what extent are my assumptions and my own values and beliefs about my own culture being challenged, tested, (re)constructed, and/or (re)negotiated?
- e) In what ways and in what contexts am I/am I not more interculturally competent?

During your encounters with your cultural other, consider how your observations, experiences, and insights might link with the learning you have been engaging with in class and in your reading about intercultural competence and intercultural communication. Do these theories/concepts in any way help to inform your understanding of how you might assess your own intercultural competence? Conversely, does your understanding of your encounters with your cultural other challenge the theories?

Conclusions

Using this research data, develop a set of criteria for self-assessment of intercultural competence. Use the two guiding research questions and the outcomes from your data collection and analysis to develop these criteria. Consider also the discussion in class in week 5 when we examined what intercultural competence is.

Personal reflection: (about 500 words and additional to the 2000 word count)

- Generally, what did you learn from doing this research assignment, including the parts you enjoyed, and/or the parts you found challenging?
- More specifically, what did you learn about your own intercultural competence? Do you believe you are now more interculturally competent or aware as a result of this research assignment? Whether yes or no, provide reasons and examples to support your answer.

Additional requirements

At the end of this course (around the time of web-submission of your assignment), please hand-submit your exercise book of journal entries and notes about the research assignment, and the signed consent form from your cultural other.

APPENDIX 2

Guidelines for Discussion at Meetings/Interviews and Recording of Journal Entries

Below is a list of possible topics intended for collaborative discussion. These are intended as a guide to get you started. You may also develop your own topics. You should be finding out about your cultural other as well as enabling him/her to find out about you. Thus, the conversation is two-way. However, your report will be mainly about your own intercultural competence when you engage with your cultural other.

The topics are intended for in-depth discussion, so you should spend your five meetings talking about one or two each time, although you do not need to cover all the topics. In-depth discussion around some of these topics should also provide interesting episodes of intercultural communication from which you can make judgments/assessments about your own intercultural competence.

You and your cultural other will need to be open and candid in your responses, especially if you want to challenge your own cultural values, beliefs, attitudes, etc. This engagement will require you to develop trust, but also to be honest. Therefore, it may be helpful to start by sharing the need to develop trust and honesty. You may, at some stage, have a discussion about what trust and honesty mean in your respective cultures.

During the discussion you will need to take notes in your journal of the ideas and dialogue that emerge. Explain to your partner why you are doing this. Note any concerns for reflection later. Immediately after the meeting write extensive notes, recalling important points, dialogue, and supporting details and examples as much as possible. Don't rely on your memory. Share field notes each week so as to check understandings and clear up uncertainties, and to gain further insights. Each time, record some of the positive/interest/challenging/unanswered points during your conversations and re-address them next time. This way, you are developing a picture of your own intercultural competence in relation to conversations with your cultural other.

Finally, remember to behave ethically at all times, to treat your cultural other as you yourself would want to be treated, and to respect confidences.

Possible Topics for Discussion with your Cultural Other

- Who are you? Discuss family, home town, reasons for coming here, aspirations, being here (differences, challenges, adjustments), living arrangements, changes you've experienced
- Family – importance to your life, influences on you/your values/ choices you made/your relationships with others
- Friends – best friends/influences/values/friendships with other students (from other cultures, including New Zealand students/friends on campus and in the community/issues around friendship)
- Entertainment and social life - hobbies/interests/sports/leisure/holidays /leisure time
- University study – How did you choose? Why? For what purpose? What knowledge do you hope to gain? Where will your qualification take you?
- Being a student in the WMS/university/community – what do you like/find challenging/dislike about the experience? In what ways has it been different from your expectations? What is it like to enter a new culture or co-culture/meet new people? What guides your behaviour?
- Work – career aspirations/influences on these?
- Part-time work – experiences – describe interpersonal relationships at work/talking to colleagues and clients (communication/adjustment challenges)
- Future aspirations – work, family, friends, travel, work/study abroad
- A political problem (in your country) that concerns you – discuss using when/what/where/why/how. (You could download an article from the Internet or take one from the newspaper to bring along to discuss.)
- A social problem (in your country).....(as above)
- Dating/socialising/marrying – expectations/constraints
- Problems of communication with people you encounter here from other cultures.
- How have you changed in coming to the University of Waikato? What differences do you notice about yourself? About others' reactions to you? How do these changes influence your relationships with family and friends?
- A possibility for a final session – evaluation
- What have each of you learned/gained (etc.)? Which parts of the process were challenging/unsatisfactory (etc.)?