

Transformative Learning Strategies for Developing Cultural Competence in Leaders

Terrence E. Maltbia
Teachers College, Columbia University

Ilene Wasserman
ICW Consulting Group

This paper explores the potential in applying transformative learning theory and related strategies for guiding diversity practitioners in constructing and facilitating targeted interventions for individuals, groups and organizations as they move through various stages of intercultural sensitivity in route to cultural competence.

Key words: transformative learning, cultural intelligence, workplace diversity

Purpose Statement

Over the past thirty years, we have noticed a marked shift in how we approach development. Once described in linear terms along one dimension, frameworks for development as well as intelligences are expanding with each new naming inviting the naming of the next. For many, encountering another who is different from them in a significant way can stimulate a disorienting dilemma. Developing a capacity to leverage diversity is an essential requirement for 21st century leadership given the reality of globalization, changing workforce demographics and increasingly diverse consumer markets. The literature on transformative learning theory and cultural dimensions of diversity each include developmental frameworks. Our intention is to make a connection between these frameworks, to explore how each informs the other, and to identify implications for practice in the areas of adult learning, development and diversity.

Context and Methodology

The co-authors conducted a preliminary review of selected literature on transformative learning and cultural diversity to explore how each might relate or inform the other. Cultural diversity as a form of engaging differences was further explored through the use of the key words: cultural competency development and cultural intelligence. The insight emerging from these literatures were used to inform the design and conduct of The Summer Principal Academy's (SPA) year long Leadership Seminar. SPA is a Master's of Arts Program designed to prepare high-performing teachers for making the transition to a variety of administrative roles in urban setting.

The Leadership Seminar's focus during the first summer is social emotional learning, with each student receiving individualized feedback and group coaching based on their multi-rater Emotional Competence Inventory – v.2 results (Wolff 2006). The feedback and coaching is supplemented by a series of three hour emotional competency development workshops over a period of six conservative Fridays. Development areas include *emotional self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, and relationship management*. We conduct six, three hour sessions focused on cultural competence for The Leadership Seminar during the second summer. Prior to the workshop, each student completes The Intercultural Sensitivity Inventory (IDI), a statistically reliable (i.e., the r-scores for the five scales are all above .80), cross-culturally valid measure of intercultural competence developed by Mitchell R. Hammer, Ph.D. and Milton

Bennett, Ph.D. based on Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS).

Since the program's inception in 2005, two cohorts have completed the IDI, resulting in a population of 86 respondents (41 Cohort I & 45 Cohort II). While a majority of the cohorts members hail from North America, the groups are diverse along the dimensions of *age* (46% are between the ages of 22 & 30; 45% - 31 & 40; 7% - 41 & 50; 2% -61 and over), *race* (48% White & 52% People of Color including Black, Hispanic, Native American, Asian and Bi-racial), and *amount of previous experience living in another culture* (nearly 19% have never lived in "another culture," while 34% have spent less than a year; 25% spent between 1 & 5 years; 5% more than 5 and less than 10 years; and 17% spent 10 years or more living in another culture. After reviewing course evaluations and reflecting on our first time teaching this segment of the seminar during the summer of 2006, the co-authors decided to use transformative learning theory, specifically Jack Mezirow's (2000) thinking as a guide for helping students explore the disorienting dilemma often triggered by the realization of the gap that often exist between their "overall perceived intercultural sensitivity" (or their "ideal self") and the "overall developmental intercultural sensitivity" (or their "real self") as measured by the IDI.

Selected Literature: Transformative Learning Theory

In reviewing the literature on transformative learning theory, we can distinguish three areas of emphasis: *descriptive*, (what it is), *processural* (how it goes) and *developmental*, (e.g., identifying one's capacity at a particular stage of development). There is general agreement in the literature about transformative learning being a foundational shift in how one knows. Mezirow, building on Freire's emancipatory learning process, defined transformative learning in adulthood as the "process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action" (2000, pp. 7-8).

Many have built on Mezirow's model of transformative learning describing the phases one cycles through to move from a disruption or disorientation in ones' experience to a change in how one engages the world as a consequence. Cranton and Brookfield, like Mezirow, describe transformative learning as a shift in one's frame of reference so that they become more open, permeable, and better justified. Cranton (1994, 2003), places a greater emphasis on the intuitive, emotional and relational aspects of the process. Brookfield's description is more action oriented using words like *challenging* one's assumptions, and *imagining* and *exploring* alternatives with reflective skepticism. Despite different areas of emphasis, Friere, Mezirow, Brookfield and identify similar steps in the process (as noted in Henderson, 2002 p. 203):

1. A disruption that challenges how one views the world
2. Critical reflection on beliefs, assumptions, and values
3. The formulation of a new perspective to deal with the discrepancies
4. The integration of the new perspective into one's life

For our work with a recent SPA cohort, we employed these insights to guide our inquiry into the question: *In what ways can the process of perspective transformation be used to influence a shift from one developmental stage of intercultural development to another?* Mezirow (2000) notes that the process of perspective transformation involves a structural change in the way we see

ourselves and our relationships, which seems relevant to the work of developing intercultural competence, in this case a shift in how one sees themselves and others in cultural terms.

Selected Literature: Engaging Diversity and Cultural Development

Until recently, diversity and intercultural competence have been largely two distinct conversations. There are practitioners and scholars who talk about fostering diversity in organizations and those who talk about *intercultural development* or *cultural intelligence*. Among those who talk about diversity, some focus primarily on the culture of organizations and what they can do to foster diversity and inclusion (e.g., Chesler 1994; Jackson and Hardiman; Sands, Holvino et al. October 2000), and those who talk about skill development to help people work with others who are different from them (e.g., Ely & Thomas, 2001). Diversity is also framed in terms of various individual and organizational responses to others, i.e., EEO and Affirmative Action, understanding differences, valuing diversity, managing diversity, leveraging diversity. More recently, the idea of *cultural intelligence* has been added to the mix and is defined as “a person’s capability for successful adaptation to new cultural contexts” (Earley and Ang, 2003 p. 59) and includes cognitive, motivational and behavioral elements.

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) is one framework that has emerged to operationalize cultural competence (J. M. Bennett & Bennett, 2004; M. J. Bennett, 1998). DMIS describes the change people experience in the quality of their engagements with others who are “different” along a number of dimensions of diversity (e.g., race, gender, age and national origins) as they become more interculturally competent. Practitioners and researchers have recently used the DMIS as a framework and set of processes to understand the emergence of global diversity in organizations. The model is designed along a continuum from ethnocentric to ethnorelative. There are six kinds of experiences that are spread across the continuum that constitute the stages of intercultural development. At the ethnocentric end of the continuum, one’s experience is characterized by avoiding cultural differences through denying, defending, or minimizing its importance. At the ethnorelative end of the continuum, people seek out cultural difference by accepting, adapting, or integrating difference as part of one’s own identity.

Description of Developmentally Sequenced Interventions

The two assessments (ECI & IDI) provided the instructional team with significant data to inform both the design of the overall workshop and “in-the-moment” interventions. In this section we summarize the results and insights gained from the two assessments as a platform of devising learning interventions to target intercultural development.

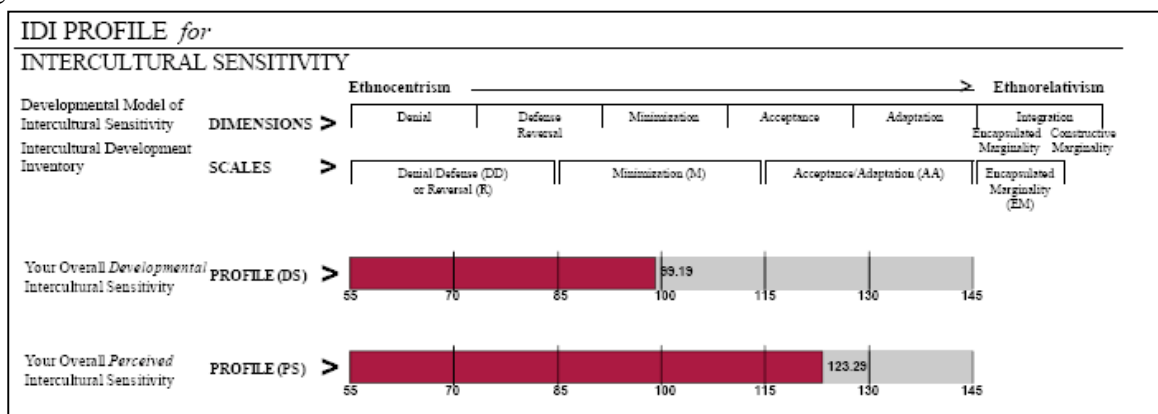
ECI Results and Implications for Intercultural Competence. The ECI Cohort Audit report provides a summary interpretation for the composite multi-rater feedback generated for Cohort II based on the Emotional Intelligence Competence Model and provides a profile of potential group behavioral patterns (Cherniss & Goleman, 2001). The 18 competencies and related developmental scales are presented in three broad color-coded categories: (1) *Green* signifies the percentage of the group achieving a target level of demonstrated behavior has been met or exceeded, (2) *Yellow* signifies the percentage of individuals within one level of meeting the target, and (3) *Red* signifies the percentage not meeting the target criteria and by extension represents a developmental challenge. Overall, 23% of the group met or exceeded the criteria for

the combination of competencies needed for each cluster of the Emotional Intelligence (i.e., the “green” zone), 49% total composite profile was in the “yellow” zone, and 28% in the “red” zone.

Further, at one extreme, five distinct competencies emerged as strengths at the group level including *optimism* with 98% of the group at or exceeding the target level; *transparency*, *achievement orientation*, and *inspirational leadership* each with 95% at target level; and 93% of the group at the target level for *influence*. At the other extreme only 7% of the cohort met or exceeded the target level for *negotiating* and *resolving conflict*, both essential for navigating differences embedded in diverse groups. Also, only 42% of the group met or exceeded the target for *empathy*, a critical capability when one considers the importance of sensing and appropriating responding to other’s feelings during intercultural interactions. Lastly, only 16% percent of the group met or exceeded the target for *initiative*, while 30% of the group members were within the “green” zone for *adaptability*. These results suggested the process of perspective transformation focused on cultural sensitivity was an important developmental task for many SPA participants.

IDI Results and Description of Workshop. Given the group’s EI profile and the gap that existed between the *overall development intercultural sensitivity* and the *perceived intercultural sensitivity* for Cohort II, we used Merizow’s (2000) concept of *perspective transformation* to help individuals, project teams and the entire cohort productively examine a number of taken-for-granted assumptions about culturally different others, using the IDI results as a platform. Figure I displays the difference between the Cohort II’s “ideal self” (or at mid-stage acceptance on the DMIS continuum) and it’s “real self” (or approaching mid-stage minimization) as measured by the IDI. This gap of 24 points between the two “scores” served to trigger a *disorienting dilemma* for many in the cohort, particularly when placed in the context of a “gap” of 8 points being viewed as significant and the group’s ECI profile suggesting a high need for achievement (Mezirow, 2000 p. 27). A developmental score of 99.19 is just about at the 50th percentile of the overview IDI database and similar to Cohort I.

Figure 1. SPA Cohort II – 2007 IDI Profile



The six session workshop focused on combining 7 of Mezirow’s 10 phases of perspective transformation with the IDI interpretive criteria and stage appropriate developmental tasks. Our intention was to first help the 9 individuals at the *denial* and *defense* end of the continuum (or 20%) move toward *minimization*, the stage required to engage in productive intercultural interactions, while helping the critical mass of individuals at various stages of minimization (or 64%) move toward *acceptance* with the balance of the cohort (or 16%). The distribution of developmental stages along the continuum required an early focus on differentiated instruction.

Prior to sharing the cohort-level results, identity and stage-based groups were formed for those at minimization of below, plus the 7 at the acceptance stage were divided into a group of 3 and 4 with as much demographic variety as possible. After reading detailed descriptions and receiving an overview of the six DMIS stage descriptions, their task was to sort 24 statements representing cultural scripts into their appropriate stage, and then share their results with the entire Cohort.

While individuals were unaware of the rationale for their group assignments, the two groups at the “acceptance stage” out performed the others during the first round, yet after an additional reading assignment and two experiential learning activities designed to enhance one’s ability to gather appropriate information about culture and explore cultural-general dimensions (e.g., individualist and collectivist), the performance of all group improved when repeating the task for another set of cultural scripts. This was the work of session 1. Another early learning activity asked participants to trace the origins of their cultural programming by first individually listing various identity groups (e.g., family, friends, co-works, community, race, gender, etc.) that played a significant role in shaping who they are today and reflect on the values, beliefs and cultural assumptions acquired from each. Participants’ then created a “headline” that capture the essence of their cultural story and then selected someone to exchange stories.

Participants were then asked to form groups based on their primary identity (the most salient) and to discuss the experience of the program through that identity group lens and again report out to the group. All of these activities were both stage appropriate based on the developmental task for those at or below minimization (or 84% of Cohort) and included: a focus on recognizing cultural differences, maintaining personal control and increased tolerance in the face of differences, enhancing knowledge about one’s own culture, and learning to listen and perceive others accurately. Near the last hour of session 2, the IDI cohort overall profile and five worldview development scales (i.e., denial and defense; reversal, minimization; acceptance and adaptation; and encapsulated marginality) were presented. As expected a disorienting dilemma was triggered by the overall results associated with clear evidence that a range of emotions were present including fear, anger, guilt, rejection, surprise, shock, and a few indicators of curiosity.

During session 3 and 4 the participants returned to their assigned groups and engaged in a series of developmentally sequenced activities that moved progressively from working with the relatively *directly observable*, “*objective*” data largely externally focused (e.g., reflecting and noticing demographic patterns of individuals they decided to share their cultural stories with during a prior session, to the IDI cohort report) to working with *reflective* data largely internally focused (e.g., discuss various reactions to “objective” data and shared prior experiences with cultural difference), to *interpretative* data (e.g., make sense of objective and reflective data by examining values and assumptions and identifying themes and patterns grounded in specific contexts) and finally *decisional* data (e.g., expressing commitments to experiment and take informed based on emerging insights). The first pass through the ORID cycle (i.e., objective, reflective, interpretative and decisional – Hogan 2003) was characterized by resistance and challenging the “validity” of both the instrument and the process.

For the 2nd pass of the ORID cycle each group received a composite of their responses to the IDI’s contextual questions. They were asked to identify key themes and share the results with the rest of the cohort. Sample contextual questions included: What is your background around cultural differences? Where and how long have you lived in a different culture? After the group report outs we introduced the group to the idea *content*, *process* and *premise reflection* and each group used the framework to review their group and class experience. Participants commented both during the session and in their journals about the value of working individually and in their

identity groups to make meaning of both the qualitative data as reflected in the IDI contextual questions and the “observable” generated in class, and the “quantitative” data based on cohort, project groups, and individual IDI profiles. These observations affirmed the importance of creating conditions for people to realize that their reactions were shared by others. In the final two sessions, mixed identity groups began to have very important conversations about race, gender and other forms of systematic bias in schools and to explore new roles by creating a “new school proposal” that integrated their commitments to the urban schools they would like to be apart of and lead. In the final session, participants shared their action plans, new cultural knowledge and skills they acquired, and their plan for trying out and transferring these insights.

Our Reflections

As practitioner-researchers a number of important insights emerged. The first is the value of organizing identity and developmental stage-based groups to foster team learning and safety in the context of difficult personal, interpersonal, social interactions with culturally different others. Bennett’s DMIS and its measure the IDI, provides a comprehensive and reliable framework for helping others navigate intercultural worldview structures holistically with cognitive, emotional and behavioral dimensions; explicit stage based developmental tasks to focus learning interventions and to assist in monitoring the process; and stage appropriate intercultural competencies. This combined with the recognition that this work often involves a predictable pattern of perspective transformation, in this case, how one comes to understand themselves as a culturally diverse individual, and the constructive nature of our growing multicultural reality.

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