

## SUSTAINABLE INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE ACQUISITION IN INTERNSHIPS ABROAD

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### Abstract

This paper outlines the cultural mentoring concept designed in the context of the SKILL2E Project, a EU-funded multilateral university-enterprise cooperation project. It addresses the issue of sustainable intercultural competence acquisition and successful integration of students in transnational placements. The concept has been designed in close cooperation with enterprises and could provide a general model for managing the increasing diversity of today's workforce and rests on three pillars: i) the usage of an on-line assessment instrument; ii) a support structure including a pre-departure training as well as an on-line platform for self-reflection; and iii) a cultural mentoring concept for enterprises.

**Keywords:** Intercultural competence, transnational placements, cultural mentoring.

### 1. Introduction

Vande Berg (2001, 31) indicates that in today's world of higher education, demonstrated outcomes and applicability to the real world are vital to the sustainment of academic programs. According to Rundstrom (2005) the skills needed differ from those even 15 years ago and must empower graduates to compete in a global market with an increasingly educated population. One way to address this is to integrate transnational work placements or internships into the curricula. The SKILL2E Project<sup>1</sup> addresses these questions and aims at designing a comprehensive concept that will tackle these issues both from the educational and the corporate angles. This concept

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<sup>1</sup> This project has been selected in the LLP-Erasmus University-Enterprise Cooperation 2010 (10% success rate). The consortium comprises six universities and four enterprises from Austria, Finland, Great Britain, Romania, Spain and Turkey as well as 2 US institutions.

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## 2. Intercultural Competence Assessment

Deardorff (2009, 478) defines intercultural competence in terms of its outcome: "The overall external outcome of intercultural competence is defined as the effective and appropriate behavior and communication in intercultural situations, which again can be further detailed in terms of appropriate [author's italics] behavior in specific contexts (appropriate behavior being assessed by the other involved in the interaction)."

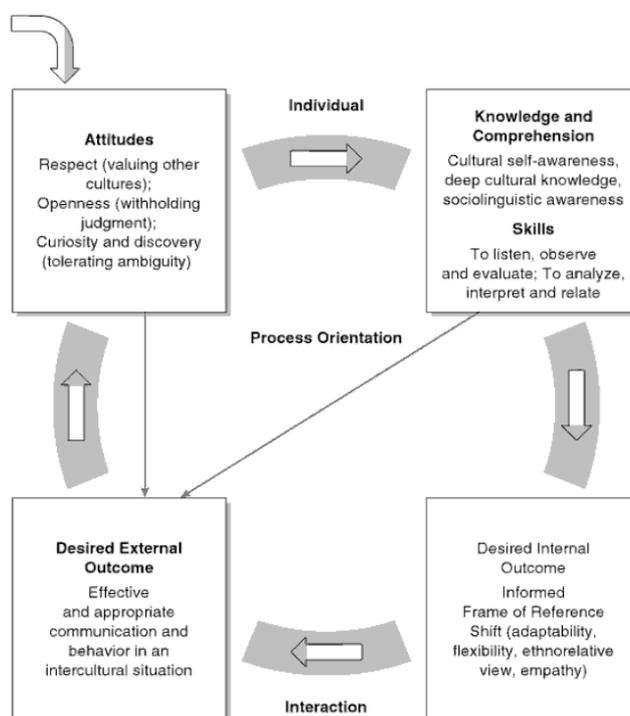


Figure 1: Deardorff Process Model of Intercultural Competence (Spitzberg and Changnon 2009, 33)

Deardorff's model seems well suited in the context of the SKILL2E concept with its intended strategic interventions before, during and after the internship abroad. It might be presupposed that anyone intending to do an internship abroad already displays to some extent the requisite attitudes Deardorff cites. These can then be enhanced as well as the participants' motivation and knowledge through the pre-departure training. The communication scenario for (self-) reflection should prove as a further catalyst towards ethnorelativity and associated skills, which, in turn, should result eventually into appropriate and effective interaction. In order to verify this hypothesized interrelationship in our concrete context, the use of an assessment instrument at defined points of the preparatory phase, during and after the internship itself seems a reasonable approach.

Assessment in the context of SKILL2E is a crucial component that needs to be integrated in every aspect of the learning process of the students. There must be a direct linkage between assessment and explicit goals and objectives - therefore, it is of utmost importance that the aspects that need to be assessed in a learning process, and instrument to be utilized, are clarified and identified. This presupposes the necessity of defining specific measurable learning outcomes in order to make assessment possible and valid. The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) and the Culture Shock Model are those most pertinent to address the issues raised in the SKILL2E project as they provide an explanation of the stages a person moves through in the process of intercultural competence acquisition. For Bennett (1993, 26), moving through these stages is associated with personal growth and must be seen as multidimensional. This development, therefore, involves one's thinking, feeling and acting. In the SKILL2E concept it will be considered an achievement if participants display a change after the internship and the associated SKILL2E interventions with respect to the stages the DMIS delineates. Here, Janet Bennet's (2003) claim that any training and intervention strategy should be informed by the individual stages participants are currently in, has to be taken into account as well and translates therefore into using the assessment instrument for needs analysis.

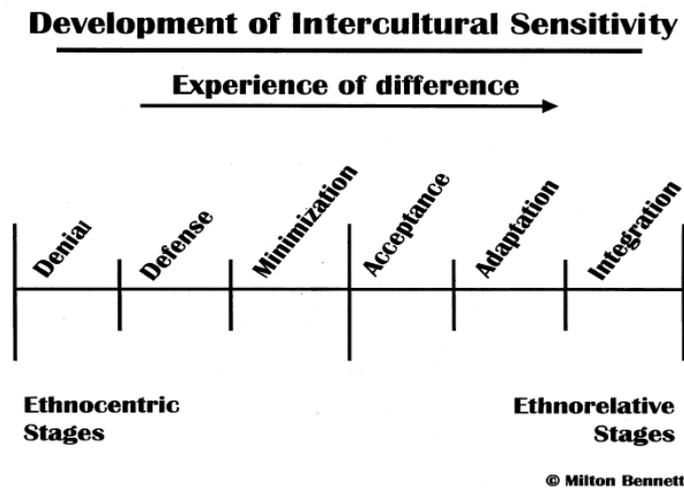


Figure 2: The Six DMIS Stages (Bennett, 1993)

### 3. Assessment Instrument Implementation

According to Deardorff (2009) intercultural competence is an "ongoing process." It is therefore important to provide opportunities for project participants to reflect upon and assess the development of their own intercultural competence. This involves incorporating "... integrated assessment throughout a targeted intervention" – in our case, primarily the pre-departure training and the online communication scenario. Based on the evidence above as well as the definition of competence and the theory-base used in the context of the SKILL2E project, the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI<sup>2</sup>), a multipurpose instrument, has been selected to assess the intercultural competence gain. The IDI meets all SKILL2E selection criteria: user-friendly implementation, free of cultural bias, availability in consortium languages (either English or native language), theory base and price-performance ratio. The IDI in its current version (IDI v3) is a 50-item instrument and takes about 15-20 minutes to complete. It is based on actual statements selected from interviews of a directed sample of 50 subjects

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.idiinventory.com/>

representing cross-cultural and situational diversity (i.e., not limited to university students). Statements are evaluated using a 5-point response scale from agree to disagree. Additionally, four open-ended questions support capturing the respondents’ intercultural experience.

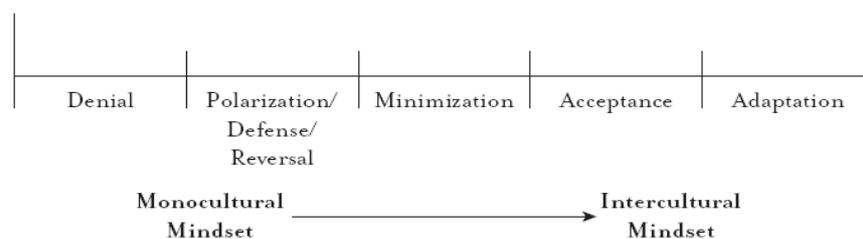


Figure 3: The Cultural Development Continuum

Reliability and Validity of the IDI is high as has been outlined above. For an extensive description of the development as well as the validity and reliability testing of the IDI see Hammer (1999, 2009, forthcoming) Hammer and Bennett (2001a, 2001b), Hammer et al (2003), Bennett (2004), Hammer, Bennett and Wiseman (2007). The following two scenarios and associated figures show the envisaged IDI deployment in the SKILL2E Project with Scenario 1 comprising both the educational and corporate environments and Scenario 2 focussing on the corporate context only.

**SKILL2 E Scenario 1**

It is intended to use the assessment instrument before and after the pre-departure training as well as after the placement. This should support training design and address the challenges students face with respect to their cultural orientation. It should also guarantee that all intervention strategies consider the stage-appropriate mindset. The learning outcomes for the training need to be tailored to the specific stage students are in but should always include a move up the IDC towards the intercultural mindset.



Figure 4: IDI Implementation scenario for transnational placements /internships

## SKILL2E Scenario 2

In this scenario that is actually a segment of the Scenario 1 the project target group of enterprises is focused on. As we see great potential in the Cultural Mentoring Concept in developing into a method to address diversity issues in a company, we will also trial this concept in combination with the usage of the IDI in general, not only those resulting from employing international interns. A major task will also be the alignment of the instrument usage with the general SKILL2E evaluation plan and the involvement of all stakeholders, not least the feedback from the students participating in the training on the realistic formulation of the learning outcomes (Deardorff, 2009).



Figure 5: IDI Implementation scenario in corporate context

### **(Self-) Reflection of Personal Intercultural Competence and Development**

As cultural self-awareness in its widest sense forms a key constituent of intercultural competence, it is vital to provide opportunities for the project participants to acquire, if necessary, intensify and most importantly, practice this skill. In the project, the online communication scenario will develop the framework for guided self-reflection during the work placement. Culture incorporates here the national, ethnic but also organizational, business sector and/or gender-related environment in the sense of Hofstede's (2005, 4) "collective programming of the mind that distinguishes people from one group or category of people from others." The Online Communication Scenario is based on the model developed in the national LeonardodaVinciII Project Skills, which has been presented at various conferences such as the SPACE 2008, NAFSA 2008 and EAIE 2009. The model highlighted its alignment with Kolb's learning cycle. This was considered as one of the relevant factors for achieving sustainability as learners were addressed in various ways and thus engagement could be intensified. The pre-departure training focused on awareness-raising and sensitizing students for cultural differences using Hofstede's five dimensions as a reference framework alongside Hall's high and low context communication and the culture shock model (abstract conceptualization). The intercultural diary carried out as a blog in an online learning platform provided the opportunity to document intercultural observations at the workplace (reflective observation), which

were re-evaluated in a double reflective loop in the guided structure of the intercultural placement report. It was hypothesized that these strategic interventions would enable reiterated conscious decisions with respect to trialling context- appropriate behaviour (active experimentation) during the transnational placement (concrete experience).

**Conclusion**

Sustainable learning needs to be grounded in sound theory that pays heed to a competence-based approach. Accordingly, learning outcomes must be verifiable. In the case of “soft skills”, such as intercultural competence, this requires innovative assessment approaches. In the SKILL2E project the IDI as a multidimensional assessment instrument is embedded in a comprehensive concept to support the learning curve through targeted training and guided self-reflection opportunities. It will provide all participants including placements students and their supervisors as well as enterprises with a new model for a sustainable and accountable intercultural competence gain.

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