Beyond Intercultural Competence: 
A Theoretical Critique of the Intercultural Model in Education Abroad

Colloquium
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CONTEXT FOR THE COLLOQUIUM

The development of a theoretical frame to guide the work and practice of education abroad has been progressing for some time but remains in the early stages of that process.

Without solid theory underpinning the nature of the work, the field of education abroad exists in a chaotic state. It is simultaneously grappling with the development of a theoretical frame and the development of curricula, pedagogies, cultural experiences and the measures to assess the effectiveness of such academic programming. How do you know what to develop when there remain questions about why you develop? How do you measure success when success is not fully defined?

If any particular model informs the practice of education abroad it is likely to be Milton Bennett’s Developmental Model for Intercultural Sensitivity, which serves as the basis for the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), widely used and respected in higher education as a way to measure cultural development.

After a presentation of the Intercultural Model, including the stages of cultural development and the accompanying IDI tool, several questions were explored and discussed.

“SHOULD ONE LOOK BEYOND THE INTERCULTURAL MODEL AND SEEK THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEORIES, MEASURES AND MODELS THAT ADDRESS VARYING INSTITUTIONAL MISSIONS AND LEARNING GOALS?”
QUESTIONS POSED WITHIN THE COLLOQUIUM

• Is cultural development and understanding at the heart of education abroad programming? If it is not, what are the learning goals associated with the particular curricula and programming? How are these types of programs best assessed?

• The Intercultural Model places a premium on ethnorelativism. If you assume that international programming is connected to or informed by institutional mission, how does one reconcile the relativistic worldview supported within the Intercultural Model with the mission of one’s institution, which is perhaps not always relativistic in nature?

• The Intercultural Model intentionally does not articulate linkages with particular curricula or pedagogies, nor is it attached to specific learning outcomes. How then does the Intercultural Model and the IDI inform practice in the education abroad context?

• Is the field of education abroad a form of cultural study? What is culture? How one perceives culture, cultural identity and cultural formation informs greatly their lens as an educator. Scholars continue to debate whether one’s culture is something that develops or is chosen, or whether it can be defined at all.

CONCLUSION

While accepting and respecting the strength, validity and contribution of the Intercultural Model, this colloquium posed the question of whether the field of education abroad is fully served by the Intercultural Model. Rather, should one look beyond the Intercultural Model and seek the development of theories, measures and models that address varying institutional missions and learning goals?

DAVID L. RUDD
Director of Strategic Planning and Research
The College of Global Studies
Arcadia University

As Director of Strategic Planning and Research, David is responsible for the development and implementation of a college wide assessment plan. In his role as Director of Strategic Planning and Research, David oversees the data center, the institutional researcher and all aspects of program review and learning assessment. He is involved in strategy and planning as we take on new projects and program development and works closely with Dr. Andrew Law, Academic Dean. David graduated cum laude from Susquehanna University with a degree in political science and research methodology, studied at Regent’s College in London, did master’s-level study at the University of Pittsburgh, and is completing his Ph.D. in Educational Psychology at Temple University. David’s primary research interests involve assessing the relationships between teaching, learning and co-curricular reflection with particular reference to the cross-cultural experiences, and the ways in which the nomenclature within the field addresses these myriad varieties of learning.
For more information, contact:

DAVID RUDD
Director of Research and Assessment
ruddd@arcadia.edu

studyabroad.arcadia.edu