Available online at:

<http://proceedings.lumenpublishing.com/ojs/index.php/lumenproceedings>

9th LUMEN International Scientific Conference Communicative Action &
Transdisciplinarity in the Ethical Society | CATES 2017 |
24-25 November 2017 | Targoviste, Romania

Communicative Action & Transdisciplinarity in the Ethical Society

The Benefits of the Third Space and the Intercultural Communication Competence Development of Students' Intercultural Communicative Competence and Thirling

Daniela MACOVEI

<https://doi.org/10.18662/lumproc.15>

How to cite: Macovei, D. (2018). The Benefits of the Third Space and the Intercultural Communication Competence Development of Students' Intercultural Communicative Competence and Thirling. In T. Ciulei, G. Gorghiu (eds.), *Communicative Action & Transdisciplinarity in the Ethical Society* (pp. 143-154). Iasi, Romania: LUMEN Proceedings.
<https://doi.org/10.18662/lumproc.15>

© The Authors, LUMEN Conference Center & LUMEN Proceedings.
Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of the conference

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 Unported License, permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited

The Benefits of the Third Space and the Intercultural Communication Competence Development of Students' Intercultural Communicative Competence and Thirling

Daniela MACOVEI¹

Abstract

Globalization is famously known for the ongoing expansion of the boundaries of travelling and contact between different cultures of the world; with it, the problem of a good interaction has also been raised. This explains the purpose of the present paper for it approaches the set of abilities that are necessary for students so that they be able to initiate, maintain and conclude a profitable act of communication with people pertaining to a culture different from their own. These aptitudes are gathered under the umbrella of intercultural communication competence, a domain which has started to be given growing attention lately especially with regard to students for they are the most resourceful human asset. The scope of the training in ICC entails a process which presupposes a passage through a third space – the name given to a rather psychological phase – which guarantees the success of the demarche. Thirling is an alternative theory whose innovation consists in the comprehension of both personal and public space with an addition of the third – which complements the first two with a dash of open-mindedness and friendliness.

Keywords: *thirling; third space; binary; student; intercultural.*

Premise

The current paper focuses mainly on the qualitative research of ICC in students; it presents and attempts to explain a detailed description of the observations and the data that have been collected regarding the context of

¹ English teacher at Liceul theoretic Dimitrie Bolintineanu, Bucharest, Romania, danna.macovei@gmail.com.

<https://doi.org/10.18662/lumproc.15>

Corresponding Author: Daniela MACOVEI

Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of the conference

events and circumstances, as well as the behaviour and emotions of the members of this category when interacting with different cultures. Patterns already manifest were afterwards gathered under common denominators and then some other patterns which are designed to increase their ICC were put to work in order to record changes in the students' intercultural interactions.

Introduction in ICC

It has been more than 30 years already since the beginning of an arousal of interest and desire to develop techniques in the field of psychological practices targeting professional training due to the fact that growing awareness has been detected in the need for interculturality proficiency in the context of militarized, political, and any area of the civilian interaction, e.g. intergroup contact, cross-cultural preparation drills, immigrant acculturation, social exchange, international management, and foreign student counseling. ICC may be seen broadly as the aptitude to reach a high level of effectiveness and appropriateness in the communication process that occurs in cultural contexts that range from on-one's-own-land to others'-land interaction.

There are voices supporting the idea that the core element for success is an inner ability which has been found to have its roots in the ninth intelligence, i.e. the emotional intelligence. Others account for it through the motivation that drives one into the communicational process; thus, a lack of motivation can be the main deterrent in achieving a high level of ICC, all the more so when the main risks in this endeavor presuppose getting outside one's comfort zone and the confrontation *and* adaptation to novelty and uncertainty.

In either case, it is safe to say that training and improvement up to excellency may be attained. But a conclusion has been reached that motivation or inborn talent is not enough to become a proficient intercultural communicator. Both need to be supplemented by knowledge and training.

Foundation of ICC

First, knowledge must tackle a history of what the self is, what otherness is, how identity and awareness of others develop, as well as how the relation between these has grown in the long run; as a matter of fact, it is a sound idea to go through the history of knowledge itself for it is a matter of cognitive failure/shortcoming or success that constitutes the basis of the

informational and mentalitarian systems of the 21st century homo sapiens. But since the focus of the present paper is just a small part of such a vast investigation, the following part will only remind of the principal ideas supported by here.

In line with Dan McAdams' theory from *Creative Self in Narrative* [1], the self is mostly created through the narration of the person about him/herself under the impetus of one's own desire to be in a certain way, and to correspond to the others' expectations about themselves, as well as to fit right in a certain social milieu. Also, when one adds Michel Foucault's philosophy according to which everything is to an overwhelming extent shaped by a given political system, one most probably reaches this conclusion: it is extremely difficult for one to get to know oneself and the others, to differentiate between what is one's own genuine mental production and perception versus what one judges through external filters, and finally, what the truth is and the truly most efficient way of communication in a world of changing discourses and representations under which other multiple layers of truths exist. In connection with the topic of the current paper, one particular standpoint will be mentioned in this section – Edward Said's exposure and explanation of Orientalism [2].

According to colonial studies, the beginning of colonialism came together with a strong tendency to live under the impression that adventuring, sightseeing and occasionally dwelling among non-whites suffices to make one assume that one really knows what *that* is about. This insolence has been running practically among all white European and American civilizations. Thereupon the West has initiated a whole range of science industries and praxes meant to imbue the white mind with self-proclaimed scientific truths on the Orient. Back to the 70s Edward Said named the phenomenon Orientalism and it seems not to be wrong in still utilizing the term even today.

In terms of identity constructed through narration, the Orient's identity as the West sees it is ruthlessly the fruit of a binary relationship – in sum, the identity of the Orient is not, as it should be, the what the Orient desires it to be via its own narration; rather, it is the reflection of the West's desire of what the Orient should be, a mirroring made public through the Western narration about the Orient. And not only does the Western overt narration about the Orient echo Western desires, but it truly shapes its identity and imposes it to the world at large, both to the East and to the West. Said remarks that Orientalism consists, in practical terms, in narrating about the Orient, in speaking on its behalf or representing it.

The issue of the binary Orient-Occident is not randomly chosen here as an example. It is clear crystal to everybody that in today's world

conflicts arise basically between these two great cultures. That there are plenty of economic and political machineries spinning beneath them is also obvious; but the main bias is supposedly the cultural one. This is the reason why scholars interested in resolving this kind of antagonism recourse to the developing of intercultural communication competence, for knowledge about self and others is to subsidize motivation with a valuable contribution in ICC configuration.

The fact that a change in attitude is a *sine qua non*, at worst (or, at best?) on behalf of equity and fairness, is undeniable. The present paper approaches this skill with reference to students because it is generally believed that the most reliable human resource for the success of this endeavor is represented by the youth. Therefore, it is in their education in the direction of the third-space thinking that investments should be made.

ICC and the environment

Tackling ICC means to explore the correlation between identity and globalization, along with an investigation of the mentioned identity which one can only savvy or interpret under the auspices of cultural conventions which, in their turn, cannot be understood unless diversity and a history of intercultural relationships are also unraveled. Thereupon the point at issue resides in the multifaceted metamorphosis of our society at the onset of the 21st century featuring intensifying globalization and the avowal of unique identities under constant pressure and threat from the part of the extant political regimes which seem to enjoy being in a never-ending crisis and shakeup through projects trying to force up new arrangements. Shortly, these elemental factors are to be considered likewise, since they refer to the bond between culture and globalization, a connection swayed by political and social maneuvers as well as governmental philosophies.

A characterization of globalization supposes an escalation of interconnectivity and, thus, the global cursive transmission of all kinds of beliefs and mentalities beyond geographical limitations. The phenomenon prompts the condensation of the time and space notions, of remote contact; the world contracts into one immense cosmopolis. And yet, paradoxically, they find themselves secluded from, and therefore by, their cultural specificities. In fact, this is the huge provocation of globalization – the chagrin derived from the implausibility of conciliation between two reciprocally repellent points of view: being one in all with being all in one.

This explains why the central focus is on exceeding the binary level in a most practical manner. So far, the best theories approaching the

controversy of binaries are those of thirdness, most famous of them being those of Homi Bhabha and Edward Soja, respectively. They offer sufficient lexis and arguments to build a new domain – that of the third space where dualism is successfully challenged through the contrivance of actually living environments animated by actual states of minds and representations. The way which leads to this aimed predicament consists in the two parties generating meaning when they communicate in circumstances different from the familiar ones, when the original, known symbols and norms are defaced by confiscation, transliteration, recalibration and assignement of new perspectives over the same but new experiences. This attitude refuses culture its pristine undividedness and obduracy; nonetheless, this could under no circumstances be ever possible if culture were not immanently liable to such transfigurations. It is, as a matter of fact, the praiseworthiness of this characteristic of culture that makes everything possible. What needs to be done – the most desirable manner in which the third space arising between two or more cultures in their communicational interplay – is to let otherness ooze, play, interpret, then mould and, ultimately, give birth to new cultural manifestations.

Practically, a large number of studies have been conducted on students taking courses abroad which resulted in discovering that the most recurrent attitudes when faced with difference is that the students weighed the advantages and disadvantages of the novelties they were surprised by, decided it is more profitable to adapt to the requirements of the new environment by adopting them. For example, Asian students used to envisage being quite and placing the entire authority to the teacher as a sign of diligence and respect, respectively, adapted to Western learning milieus by acknowledging the potentiality of asking questions and participating in discussions or even taking the floor uninvited in whole group debates. However, those studies did not scrutinize the dominant culture groups. It is unclear how the Asian students were seen by the hosts. Notwithstanding, in the case of both guest and host cultures, emphasis was placed on a patterned course of action which may be best described in the following simple words: becoming aware of differences, willingness to reconcile possible biases, willingness to explore the potential of the newness and, finally, adopt a balanced attitude which neither negates one's or the other's originality, nor transfigures completely so that to become unrecognizable. The process is in itself an adventure to the undertaking of which one needs to feel completely unreluctant and happy to take. In other words, negotiation is the new way. 'Win-win' is the new way. And...strong will is the pivot that turns the wheel. It takes intelligence and strength of character to become aware that others can be as good or even better than oneself and not only to

be that open-minded so that to accept others, but to even adopt their way if that proves to be better. It is an extremely tough experience to put aside pride. And everything must start to look boringly presbyteral. This is, indeed, what all laymen should do, since we all live the consequences of wars. And, as any successful long-term project, this one, too, should start with the basic layers of resources – in this case, the human resources which are the youth. They need to be taught about third space theories, how to ponder each culture's strong and weak points, how to make SWAT analyses of their own and other cultures and, at the end, how to draw a line in which a mixture of the advantages and disadvantages to be clear so that the students to be determined to adopt the perfect mix on a set of win-win criteria.

As a starting point, a self-analysis is most suited, since any change commences with oneself. In this context, knowing oneself as an individual, as well as knowing one's culture are prerequisites for success. As for the first part, intensive applied psychology courses and workshops are commendable. For the latter, a study of the history of civilizations as well as Edward Said's critique of the West in *Orientalism* together with Ben Salama's documentary of the East *Au Nom de l'Islam* may be very good starting points. All these should, of course, be accompanied by inner or induced desire for novelty, for empathy and peace.

A *sine qua non* for unprejudiced and tenable growth at both personal and societal levels is the progression from *mono* to *inter* conceptualizations which would translate into interculturalism as a token of esteem for communication and exchange, otherness and equilibrium, as well as for the right to be different but equal.

In terms of practicality, this mentalitarian shift manifests itself through the creation of completely new perspectives over or the reading anew of the facts of existence as to oneself and the world around with the specific and determined purpose of connecting and intertwining with otherness. After all, everything comes down to a basic key point – maturity, which infuses the totality of processes of life through natural insight into, responsiveness to and valuation of diversity.

ICC as a cultural factor

As stated above, such a desideratum may come true through the bringing together of different cultures to make them dialogue and cooperate, in sum, to negotiate their identities and so, to strike a balance in their interplay without regard to the size, nor (non)dominant or guest vs. host positions. Maturity also presupposes the attainment of a high level of trust

even to the point of taking the others on faith on the background of the mutual mature understanding and respect mentioned earlier. Without doubt, this is the junction point of all and any ratiocination challenging binary paradigms which come under the umbrella of the doctrine behind trialectical thinking. It is, indeed, high time binarisms were done with. They have demonstrated over the centuries of thinking that they are defective and, time and again, not sensible. It is not about dismissing it altogether, but rather about supplementing it since it is limited and limiting. Again, in following Bhabha, the complement can be found in the interspaces that he so persuasively argues that exist in an intercultural discourse which cries for the transgression beyond dialectical polarities. It is only by tracking down and making sensible use of these spaces that a third space can be created and made the best of. This new space means, first and foremost, a flipside of the bigeminal rationale.

Trialectical thinking is difficult. [...] It is disorderly, unruly, constantly evolving, unfixed, never presentable in permanent constructions. [But it] is a necessary part of understanding Thirdspace as a limitless composition of life worlds that are radically open and openly radicalizable. [3, p.47]

About 60 years ago, we find the same idea in Aldous Huxley's comments about Westerners' static and inelastic normative and conventional societal and mentalitarian systems; one of them regards music, but it encompasses all other systems, by extrapolation – he contends that "conventions of expression should vary more widely" [4, p.437] if we want to broaden the perspective. The limiting characteristic of dyadic systems of thought can only result in inappropriateness of ratiocination. For instance, he gives himself as an example when he realizes that he might not be right about certain matters: "I looked at the whole matter from the wrong end, so to speak" [4, p.446] with reference to a cultural dissimilarity between Europeans and Indians. Further, in order to expand the limits of our mind, we need to unlearn all that we have been taught and "[a]ll we can do is to set forth the opposed arguments, and, having done so, to watch the experiments that are being made with an open and always critical mind." [4, p.371] Huxley or other great thinkers had not yet named it trialectical thinking, or, in Edward Soja's words – 'thirding-as-Othering' theory – but this is what they meant. Soja himself gave it this name by internalizing Henri Lefebvre's creed that 'il y a toujours l'Autre.' In Soja's view, trialectical thinking enspheres three areas: a zone of perception, one of conceptualization and one of living. In other works of literature, it is probably not a coincidence that research of the third space is based on three

premises: one targeting naturalism for it regards the record of the specificities of human behavior breaking through in natural, everyday environment; one is concerned with far-reaching understanding of this behavior, favoring just the observation and penetration of it, together with a detailed depiction of it, and not the drawing line after conclusions at the end; and, lastly, another one which rather focuses on investigation which would hopefully reveal new denotations of the unexplored instead of simply putting forth a number of assumptions.

In consonance with this welcome broad-mindedness, the progress of the intercultural communication is eased and assisted by such theoretical postulates and practical endeavors. Therefore, educational curricula are continuously designed for intercultural education is upheld as a key determinant of the warranty for social stability and national security. As a matter of evidence, Romanian curriculum, university level included, is largely characterized by a monocultural approach only in as much as intercultural education has not become yet the subject of a public systematic research, but rather of an individual kind.

The larger part of these investigations first made an attempt to expound on the intercultural communication process and to address it from all the angles that this would presuppose. A dominant originator of the conceptualization of the phenomenon of intercultural communication would be that one can reckon that one of the specificities of this process are the particular needs and stimuli that trigger it in the first place.

Another aspect to be taken into consideration is that intercultural communication is better fathomed if it is acknowledged to have a past, a present and a future; id est, communication is configured by a sort of dynamics which implies an interplay with specific characteristics given by the cumulus of each speaker's experience, taking a form in which each can identify one's own particularities to a greater or a lesser extent.

Notwithstanding, the aspects presented so far make merely a portion of the elements that must be scrutinized when one is to understand the depths of the intercultural communication process and further to detect the skills needed for profitable communication, as well as to design the ways in which these abilities can be developed.

ICC in education

In order to build curricula and paradigms of teaching meant at bettering intercultural communication, it is recommendable to appraise the denouements, for a start. In what way may this be done? Well, the scheme is

classical – first, there is an evaluation of the initial capabilities, then reconnaissance work for collecting information about the ‘terrain’ is taken on other parties and innumerable different other aspects, and finally a decision upon a course of action with an estimate of the most probable outcomes is made.

In the long run, many attempts to define intercultural competence have been recorded, each succeeding in encompassing quite satisfyingly the large spectrum of skills involved, as well as the necessary level of them needed for proficiency. On the other hand, they are more or less similar in how they perceive intercultural communicational competence – either as congenital talent, or as a condition that can be instilled from the scratch and grown to get at its best by proper drilling. Heretofore, a person’s ICC has been consented upon as consisting in an individual’s aptitude to raise information, invest meaning in it and then adopt a convenient attitude vis-à-vis the cultural or multicultural context they are to deal with so that they bring their performance at excellency.

Internationally mobile students are obviously one of the most common instances of such situations; as a consequence, there is a strong urge that students develop ICC as proficiently as possible.

The history of this field stands proof of the enthusiasm of researchers who have provided so far quite numerous assessments of the human capabilities involved since it has become very clear that intercultural communication capacity or ICC must be set on equal footage as the other types of intelligences, the emotional one, in particular due to the fact that the latter is actually in so tight association with ICC.

The Situational Judgment Test has turned out to be the most commonly utilized assessment tool up to present. With it, the examinees are faced with a hypothetical scenes and are asked to opt for a response which they decide most suitable from among many options that come under the form of linguistic structures depicting possible real-life situations; at other times, they are required to provide free answers to questions with open ends. This type of evaluation discloses the specific knowledge, behavior and skills that the ICC implies.

The Simulation-Based Measurement Tool is another highly appreciated test. It involves the testees in a role-play game that reproduces an intercultural scenario. One of the tested persons behaves according to social and cultural conventions different from his/her co-player’s and they are expected to cope with and negotiate the terms until their communication is harmonious and strikes a balance.

The efficiency of the two examples of instruments has been proven numerous times and this is the reason why they are also used as drills to

practice the necessary skills ICC involves. However, there are at least two risks the use of these kinds of exercises runs. One regards the fact that they offer a restricted framework whose limits are given by the singularity and particularity of the contexts used. A second one refers to the fact that they are dependent on the knowledge of the targeted culture's language;

As a consequence, it appears that when ICC is targeted at one culture only, it is confined to the specificities of the respective culture, its goals and success are not particularly relevant. Therefore, it becomes mandatory that the testers and trainers be natives. The chances that a great number of people have highly skilled professional testers and trainers *and* natives of the targeted cultures are not very promising yet.

At this turning point, one is forced to limit oneself to dealing with the most of what reality can offer at the moment. Thus, due to the statistics available, a good ICC means now an ability characteristic of a person whose experience luggage consists in numerous encounters and interactions with multiple cultures, who, due to the vastness of his/her experience, is a higher level of tolerance, openness and understanding, empathy and adaptability to otherness. The extent to which these qualities are dependent on education and training of ICC or on strictly personal self-education, will and talent, is rather blurred. However, for the sake of the present topic, it may be concluded that it appears more tactical to assess the testees' general cultural knowledge and not that about a certain culture. And what is most valuable, there seems great consensus on the fact that it is mostly inner proclivity pertaining to ICC and not the training of these that make the foundation of ICC.

As Aldous Huxley famously proclaimed back in the 1960s, awareness is the salvation of the West. The idea is not new, of course, but it is remarkable that during the era of imperialism when contacts with the East intensified, more and more Westerners started to realize that facing otherness makes one detach from oneself, inquire and analyze oneself, and ultimately understand oneself as an individual, as a social and cultural being, understand systems of thinking and social arrangements, with the due influences on oneself, the group and the other groups which do not belong to the same patterning. Furthermore, once patterns and stereotypes detected, these may be avoided, adapted, transfigured or even erased if one comes to that level of willingness to refuse conflicts – this being the key moment on this evolutionary process of overcoming binary ratiocination. And finally, equipped with awareness and desire, one easily finds the motivation and strong will to start (self)/training in third space thinking and behavior. Obviously, the performers will discover that the benefits of a sophistication of thought and approach are most welcome in this and all other fields of life.

Besides the basis of training (that points rather to inner transformation), a number of professionals made efforts to complement it with practical training as follows. 52 *Activities for Improving Cross-Cultural Communication* by Donna Stringer and Patricia Cassiday [5] provides an introductory part that is meant to prepare the reader psychologically for it stresses exactly the foundation which was spoken of earlier – arousing awareness to abstract universalities versus stereotypes and perception (which is "susceptible to both personal and cultural experiences"). Also, the authors rely on LaRay Barna in order to call attention on reasons for failure in intercultural communication which "*assumption of similarities; language differences; nonverbal misinterpretations; preconceptions and stereotypes; tendency to evaluate and, finally, high anxiety*". [5, p.xi] An additional useful instrument the book offers is to be found in its appendix A; there, advice on the initiation in reflection on the self and others tackles aspects like: a person's own biases; drilling for flexibility in thinking and communication style; a slower pace in reaction and a rechecking of the assumptions with the aid of such questions as 'what assumptions am I making?' and 'how do I know my assumption is accurate?' which allows the opportunity to be more effective; taking for granted that someone else has positive intentions; dissemination of how one feels and what impact other people's behavior had on you and elicitation from others to do the same sharing; formulation of personal intentions; awareness in how one do the listening, which has to become free of patterns and emphatic; the use of *D.I.E.* technique (*Describe, Interpret, Evaluate*) in the case when one sincerely dislikes one's interlocuter or feels confused by the latter's attitude; asking of someone else's behavior, "*Is a difference that makes a difference?*" This is an advanced technique, made possible only when someone is able to set aside their own behavioral preferences and consider how another behavior might work. If someone else's behavior does not negatively affect (a) cost; (b) people or productivity; (c) safety; or (d) legality, then it is not generally a difference that makes a difference, and allowing someone to use behaviors that are most culturally comfortable for them will increase their feelings of being respected." [5, p.xi]

The present paper hopes to have succeeded in offering relevant insight into both theoretical and practical approach of intercultural communication competence with particular emphasis on the strong necessity of ICC training of students. Beyond any doubt, this will be of great help to them when performing in multicultural environments. And even if such contexts are for some less probable, training one's mind in trialectical thinking is a gain in itself for it clearly means self-improvement and, multiplied, a huge progress for humanity. As made clear previously, the basic

reasons that form the foundation of any ICC predisposition reside in the psyche. As such, proficiency in ICC starts from the following assumptions: openness to novelty, open-mindedness to diversity, strength for self-criticism, willingness and power to step out of the box of limited stereotyped thinking. With this onset, one is very likely to be able to be open and wish to espouse the idea of diversity, to avow and internalize it into one's mentalitarian system, with due courtesy and enthusiasm, all the more since, once arrived at this level, one is clearly able to understand that differences root from educational, social and cultural patterns.

References

- [1] McAdams, Dan P., Josselson, Ruthellen and Lieblich, Amia (2006) *Identity and Story. Creating Self in Narrative*, Washington: American Psychological Association.
- [2] Said Edward, *Orientalism*, London: Penguin, 1977
- [3] Soja Edward, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, Massachusetts, Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1996.
- [4] Huxley Aldous, *Complete Essays*, vol. 2, Ivan R. Dee, Chicago, 2000.
- [5] Stringer Donna, Cassidy Patricia 52 *Activities for Improving Cross-Cultural Communication*, Intercultural Press, an imprint of Nicholas Brealey Publishing, Boston, 2009.