Chapter 23
Cultivating Global Citizens:
Classroom Tools to Reduce Cultural Judgment and Foster Intercultural Understanding in Higher Ed

Jenna Andrews-Swann
Georgia Gwinnett College, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the author's experiences working with international content in the higher education classroom to explore successful examples of intercultural material that can benefit students pursuing a degree in any field. The author explores how social science courses in general, and anthropology courses in particular, that work from a foundation of cultural relativism and standpoint theory can equip students with important knowledge and skills that promote tolerance and respect of cultural difference. Finally, the author demonstrates that students finish courses like these with a better understanding of and appreciation for the cultural differences that exist all around them.

INTRODUCTION

Students undertaking a four-year undergraduate degree program stand to benefit immensely from international and intercultural content that is integrated into higher education curricula – perhaps now more than ever. A number of scholars have documented this increased need, emphasizing that success in an ever-globalizing world relies in part on students' development in the areas of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006) and cross-cultural empathy (Haigh, 2007). While campus communities increasingly see the value of international and intercultural opportunities, the process of changing curricula or introducing new programming is not always an intuitive one. In fact, a surprising number of undergraduate students still outwardly bristle at ideas and practices unlike their own. On college campuses, where ideals of open-mindedness and diverse opinions and experiences are meant to encourage interdisciplinary thought, efforts to promote intercultural perspectives are too often unsuccessful, and fall short of providing a holistic perspective that encourages the development of competent, global citizens.

What all of this seems to signal is that in spite of various tropes touting the importance of blurry, vague ideas like "diversity" and "multiculturalism" in creating a more tolerant and inclusive society, there still exists a good deal of ethnocentrism and closed-mindedness in a typical college classroom. One might argue (as many scholars do, see Homan et al., 2015) that this indicates that token attempts at increasing international and cross-cultural understanding via "diversity training" and the like are not working well. And if this is indeed the case, what happens when these students take jobs and become leaders in the global marketplace? More often than not, they are inadequately prepared to move forward as empathetic, productive global citizens.

Exposure to international or intercultural information is an important step in the process of internationalizing college curricula – and in, by extension, college students' training – but it is only one of many. In fact, many scholars have noted the dangers inherent in such an approach: treating cultural diversity as an addendum to "real" course material is not doing justice to the process (e.g. Leask, 2001). Instead, what needs to occur is careful integration and investigation that encourages students to appreciate and to question why particular cultural practices or ideologies exist – what Milton Bennett called "ethnorelativism" in his influential Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) work (Bennett, 1993).

This chapter explores the role that cultural relativism and standpoint theory have played in the author's curriculum design and teaching thus far, focusing primarily on the author's work at Georgia Gwinnett College, a new four-year liberal arts institution with an access mission near Atlanta, Georgia. The author argues that using pedagogical tools that counter ethnocentrism with cultural relativism and standpoint theory can result in a more advanced level of intercultural understanding for many students. The chapter demonstrates that, even though a few undergrads come into their first anthropology class expecting to talk about digging up dinosaur bones, they end the semester with a better understanding of and appreciation for the cultural differences that exist all around them.

BACKGROUND

Institutions of higher education, if they are to successfully fulfill their responsibility to students' holistic development, must carefully consider how to train students and faculty alike on the effects of globalization; first and foremost is the increasing need to negotiate intercultural relationships. Globalization functions today as both ideology and fact; that is, it simultaneously frames transnational policy and international agendas (e.g. NAFTA, the World Bank), and impacts how individual people engage with the world around them (e.g. Facebook, WhatsApp). Both facets of globalization influence higher education, in that students are seeking training and skills they will need to work in a swiftly changing globalized economy *and* they are seeking this skill set while surrounded by cultural information from a myriad of places. Faculty and administrators are thus faced with negotiating the wildly diverse economic and cultural impacts of globalization on both fronts, as well. A growing number of scholars from various campuses and institutes around the world have made the case for adopting a framework of internationalization in higher education to deal with this complicated task (Leask, 2001; Knight, 2004; Altbach & Knight 2007). As the author posits here, anthropology is a productive place to do this work – especially if the ultimate goal of such a framework is to foster a sense of intercultural empathy and understanding (and not merely to prepare workers for the global economy) that students can then adapt to a wide variety of disciplines, careers, and life situations they may encounter.

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