Facilitating Intercultural Competence: A Pilot Project at Vanier College

Why Intercultural Competence?

The goal of the pilot study was to find effective ways to increase students' intercultural competence, the capacity of students to shift their cultural perspectives and adapt their behaviour to the cultural differences and commonalities surrounding them (Hammer, 2012). Both the Quebec government and Vanier College have underlined the importance of educating students to navigate their lives in a globalised world. Intercultural competence is a vital ability that will assist students personally and professionally.

In order for educational institutions to be sites of personal development, citizenship building and inclusion, diversity must be actively attended to or "activated" (Chang, 1999; Chang et al., 2006; Pitt & Packard, 2012). Intercultural competence helps leverage diversity in a manner that assists learning for the majority of students. The academic literature clearly links marginalisation and social exclusion to lower academic success rates (Fichten et al., 2014). Researchers have found that increasing students' intercultural competence helps to create a more welcoming environment (Whitelaw, 2016), improving academic success rates in the process (Mohawk College, 2012). Interculturally competent students gain skills for their future while potentially improving the academic success of their peers.

Methodology

A volunteer sample of 22 Vanier College students from two sections of the humanities World Views course, *Being Canadian*, were recruited to participate in the project. Seventeen completed the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), a fifty-item questionnaire that measures intercultural competence. The IDI was selected because it is used worldwide and enjoys a high level of validity (Hammer, 2012). The result on the IDI situates the individual in terms of orientation to cultural difference along the Intercultural Development Continuum (IDC). The IDC ranges from the monocultural orientations of Denial (misses difference) and Polarisation (judges difference), to the transitional phase of Minimisation (highlights similarities), to the intercultural orientations of Acceptance (understands difference) and Adaptation (bridges across difference) (Hammer, 2012, p. 118-124) (Figure. 1). Following an analysis of responses, the IDI result was presented to each student along with an Intercultural Development Plan (IDP), tailored specifically to their orientation to cultural difference.
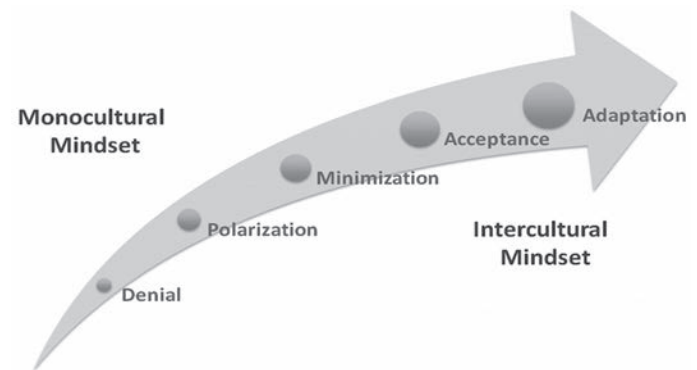

Figure 1: Intercultural Development Continuum
(Hammer, 2012, p. 119)

At the end of the semester, students were sent a follow-up survey to assess their perception of their intercultural development. Students were also asked to evaluate the effectiveness of the IDI, IDC, their IDP, and course activities, assignments and materials. Eight of the 17 participants completed the follow-up survey.

Findings and Discussion

Group Report
According to the IDI Group Report, which provides a summary of key features of the respondents, 65% of the students had lived in another country and 75% were Canadian citizens. Based on the results on the IDI, the participants oriented to cultural difference in the following manner: 0 Adaptation; 1 Acceptance; 9 Minimization; 6 Polarization; 1 Denial. Of particular relevance is that only one of the students was orienting to cultural difference at an intercultural level. Although a pilot study, this does point to the potential need for intercultural competence development of Vanier students.

Orientation Gap
The necessity for intercultural competence development is further supported when one considers that the average Orientation Gap, the difference between how someone believes they are orienting to cultural difference (Perceived Orientation) and how they are actually orienting to cultural difference (Developmental Orientation) was

31 points. Anything above 7 points is considered meaningful. The participants, on average, believed that they were orienting two levels ahead of where they actually were on the IDC. For example, a student orienting from a Polarization (monocultural) level could believe they are actually orienting at a level of Acceptance (intercultural). This is important for the student to know because in an intercultural exchange, they may believe that they are understanding difference deeply, when in fact they may be experiencing difference in superficial and stereotypical ways. There is also a risk that students will think that personal intercultural development is not needed because they believe that they are already highly capable. One student expressed their appreciation for being made aware of their IDI results in the following manner: "this IDI was essential, miss. You gave us the theory, but knowing where we stood helped us know where to start."

The results on the follow-up survey indicated that the average perceived Orientation Gap was reduced by 50%, which represents one full level of development and suggests a more realistic self-assessment of intercultural competence. This may be attributed a number of possible factors. Being made aware of their orientation to cultural difference at the beginning of the semester gave students a realistic sense of their intercultural capabilities. In addition, students expressed that the course provided many opportunities for intercultural competence growth.

Intercultural Development Plan
Each student was presented with an Intercultural Development Plan (IDP), which was tailored to the results on the IDI. In concert with each student, suggestions were made for intercultural development. An example of this would be the case of students who were orienting to cultural difference at the level of Minimization. At this level, there is a tendency to minimize difference, to see people as all being very similar, and, that differences are just not that important. Students orienting at this level were invited to find out more about their own and others' cultural beliefs, values and practices. Some students were very reticent to ask others about their culture because they thought that it would be impolite and potentially racist to ask. To address their concerns, a discussion of the role of context and ways that questions about culture and identity could be asked in a respectful fashion was broached. Students were also asked if they would be insulted if someone asked them about their own culture, respectfully and in a spirit of curiosity. All said that they would be happy to oblige and did already share such information. Later on in the semester, students expressed that they had learned about and felt closer to the people that they had approached with their questions. The following conveys this position well: "I find that people want to share knowledge, you just have to ask" and "it becomes easier each time I ask someone". These opportunities for interaction are important insofar as meaningfully and respectfully engaging with people from diverse backgrounds may promote inclusion (Whitelaw, 2016) while simultaneously encouraging a deeper understanding of similarities and differences.

Another example of recommendations based on the IDP was for students orienting to cultural difference at the level of Polarization.

At this level, difference is seen but tends to be judged negatively or positively, often based on stereotypes. While those orienting to cultural difference at the level of Minimization were asked to attend to differences, those orienting at the level of Polarization were asked to see similarities between themselves and those they deemed to be different. In other words, they were being encouraged to shift to the level of Minimization. Meanwhile, those orienting at the level of Minimization were provided with means to help them reach the level of Acceptance, by seeing and understanding meaningful difference.

Four out of the eight respondents tried at least one suggestion based on the IDP. They all reported that the activity supported their intercultural development.

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Additional Pedagogical Considerations

Self-Awareness
In addition to one-on-one feedback sessions, course design, assignments, readings and activities were geared to facilitate intercultural development. There is evidence that this is an effective approach to curricular and pedagogical development at the university level (Kruse, Perzynski, & Didion, 2014). Pedagogical activities and approaches were assessed to determine their usefulness at the college level.

One key aspect of intercultural competence development is cultural self-awareness (Berardo & Deardorff, 2012). This was accomplished in a number of ways. Students were taught the basics of the concept of culture then asked to write about their own and share with a peer. Most soon discovered that the task was harder than it sounded. Some came to realise that it is difficult to recognise one's culture when it is the 'norm' and one is constantly immersed. Also of importance was for students to discover that for some of their peers, the opposite was true. As minorities along many possible continua, they were reminded of belonging to a potentially marginalised social position regularly and by virtue of navigating from such positions, were likely to be more culturally self-aware.

The first assignment of the course *What is a Worldview?* required that students research the concept of a worldview and to provide a detailed example. Students then shared their answers, followed by a group presentation. This activity gave students an initial introduction to worldviews and set the stage for various viewpoints and perspectives. A goal was for students to see that they had one of many possible perspectives, to de-center the idea of Truth and realise that there may be many different perceptions of the same phenomena. All

the participants found that the activity was effective in their intercultural competence development. Another activity that the respondents found effective was a Modified Privilege Exercise, which encouraged self-awareness on a number of axes.

Assignments and questions following documentaries were used to move from providing valuable content in the first instance, to a metacognitive level of self-awareness by asking students to consider why their opinions might be similar or different compared to those in the film, or their fellow classmates. An additional objective was for the students to be able to make the link between explicit, that which is visible, and implicit culture, the ideas, beliefs and values underpinning actions/rituals/ways of being. One student notes, "Seeking for understanding one's point of view was really interesting and at the same time effective in order to improve my intercultural competency skills."

Multiple Perspectives

A building block of intercultural development is to encourage and be aware of multiple perspectives (Dimitrov & Haque, 2016). One additional benefit of multiple perspectives is that it may also serve as a means of encouraging a sense of inclusion among students. When students see the theories, views and experiences of people from their backgrounds reflected in the course materials, they may sense that they too are valued. The Being Canadian course pack includes research articles by Indigenous and immigrant scholars addressing issues of marginalisation, social class, non-recognition of credentials, and history in the present.

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Documentaries are shown in the course that include first-person accounts by people who have faced challenges in Canada including people seeking refugee status; Indigenous people who explain some of the effects of Residential School and the colonisation of their lands; as well as people who have faced racism, among other social justice issues. The goal is to have students hear directly from people who have had the experiences. This lends credibility to the issues and helps the students to become aware on a level that encourages understanding and empathy. When asked which documentaries, if any, assisted their intercultural development one student responded, "All of them, because they informed us about how some social issues related to culture are still present in Canada, such as white privilege and the difficulties Indigenous people have to face." This awareness will be helpful regardless of the level of intercultural competence.

Dialogue

Dialogue was actively encouraged as was feedback on course films, activities and materials. Pitt and Packard (2012) note that the formal interactions that take place in a course discussion offer the most potential for educators to extract the benefits of structural diversity on college campuses (p.315). Of note is that when asked which aspects of the course helped them to develop their intercultural competence,

all eight believed that hearing the views of others was very effective. Seven believed sharing their own views was helpful. One student who was orienting to cultural difference at the level of Polarization noted, "in a way, just acknowledging others' views, and listening to them didn't just help me to understand their view but to understand their culture." The wording of this response is already indicating an understanding of the complexity of communication, and the connection between explicit and implicit culture.

In order for dialogue to be effective, students need to feel that they are able to share their views and be respected. One respondent explains, "our class was really open to new opinions and I did not feel like I was being judged." Please note that while the student did not feel judged, this did not mean that all opinions or views needed to be accepted. On the contrary, engaging with different views is essential for intercultural competence development. Of relevance is at the start of the semester some of the students would quickly jump in with a contrary opinion but by the second half they tended to ask questions and for clarifications before taking a position. This spirit of curiosity is invaluable in intercultural work and encourages informed intellectual debate.

Intent Versus Perception

Another key aspect of intercultural learning is the difference between intent and perception. Simply put, what one intends is not always perceived in the same way and this can and does cause intercultural friction (Qin, 2014). A modified version of PhotoVoice (Lefebvre, 2012) was used for students to explore intent versus perception. Students were invited to take two photos, one of inclusion and the other of exclusion. They then wrote on the back of each photo whether it represented inclusion or exclusion and the reasons why. During class, students exchanged photos and assessed four, deciding whether each represented inclusion or exclusion. Once that was done, they would flip the photo over to see what the photographer had intended. Students then reflected upon potential reasons for similarities or differences in interpretation. Survey respondents noted that this was a very useful activity that should be repeated in future semesters.

Conclusion

The students' assessments at the end of the course suggest that the IDI, pedagogical approaches, assignments and course design were effective means for building intercultural competence. Two quotes by participants summarise the some of the benefits well:

"When people talk together and they say something very bi-ased about another culture, I feel the need to explain to them that things are not exactly as they seem and that other person that they consider different from them has his or her own reasons to act that way."

"It was a very interesting class. I believe that what I learned in it will help me not just to get grades but also to be a person."

Building intercultural competence is not the purview of a single department or instructor. The author's future research seeks to make means of facilitating students' intercultural development applicable across faculties, promoting the likelihood that graduates have a key skill to live as effective and engaged citizens in a global environment.

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