

SKILL2E: a Proposal to Prepare Students for International Work Placements

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1. Introduction

According to Rundstrom [1] 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. In other research, McAllister et al. [2] highlight the necessity in which “[p]rofessionals are increasingly being required to work in diverse, multicultural environments. Accordingly, skills in intercultural practice are a prerequisite to professional knowledge and competence. Ensuring that these are developed is increasingly part of the core business of universities.” McCabe [3] has pointed out that even though the number and scope of student study abroad programs is ever increasing, McAllister et al. [4] have stated that most professionals need to be able to work with people from vary diverse cultures, and thus “culturally specific competence has limited utility in most modern professional contexts.” Therefore, the current challenge is based on assisting students to develop an awareness that transcends specific culture knowledge and develop intercultural competence usable on a global level.

The SKILL2E Project addresses these questions and aims at designing a comprehensive concept that will tackle these issues both from the educational and the corporate angles. One way to address this is to integrate transnational work placements or internships into the curricula. This concept 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.

2. Theoretical Framework for Intercultural Competence

There are several definitions of cultural competence; Fitzgerald [5] identifies cultural general competence as more of a context-bound, practice-based, awareness, knowledge, attitude and skills concept. Moving one step further, Deardorff [6] defines intercultural competence in terms of its outcome: “The overall external outcome of intercultural competence is defined as the effective and appropriate behaviour and communication in intercultural situations, which again can be further detailed in terms of *appropriate* [author's italics] behaviour in specific contexts (appropriate behaviour being assessed by the other involved in the interaction).”

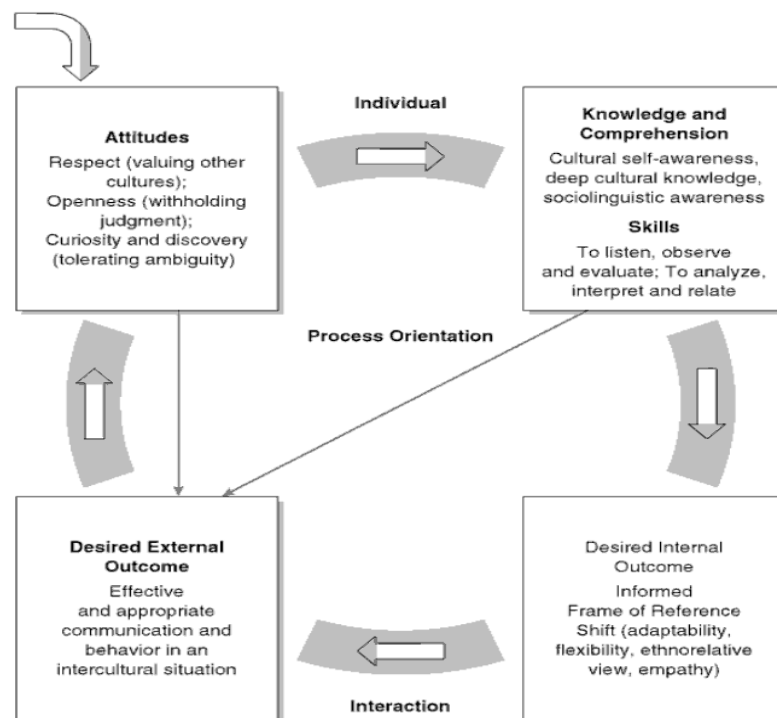


Figure 1. Deardorff Process Model of Intercultural Competence in Spitzberg and Changnon [7].

The Deardorff 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. 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 [8], 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, Bennet *et al.* [9] 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.

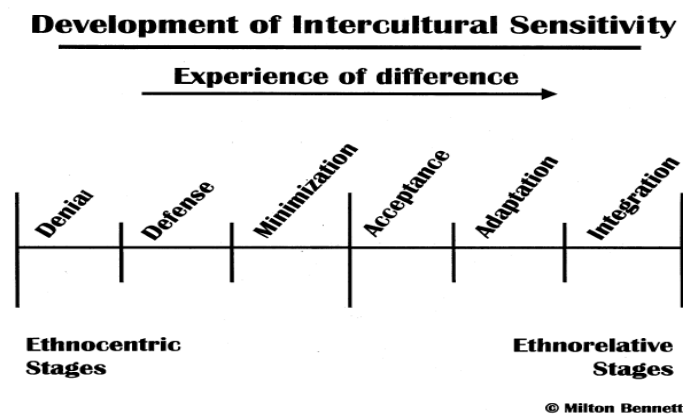


Figure 2. The Six DMIS Stages (Bennett, 1993)

3. The SKILL2E Concept

Vande Berg [10] 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. The SKILL2E model therefore follows a concept that regards intercultural competence is an on-going process. This concept thus incorporates an initial assessment stage using the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), followed by pre-departure training based on the test results. Then the students move onto their internship where they have guided self-reflection and in company cultural mentoring. The last step is the reassessment upon their return.



Figure 3. The SKILL2E Concept

According to Deardorff [11] " 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 the SKILL2E case, primarily the pre-departure training and the online communication scenario.

3.1 Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI)

Based on research as well as the definition of competence and the theory-base used in the context of the SKILL2E project, the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), a multipurpose instrument, has been selected to assess both the initial intercultural competence and the post-internship 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 representing cross-cultural and situational diversity (i.e., not limited to university students). Reliability and validity of the IDI is high. For an extensive description of the development as well as the validity and reliability testing of the IDI see Hammer [12] [13] and Hammer, Bennett and Wiseman [14].

A sample individual reading from one of the participants in the SKILL2E project can be seen in figure 4. This reading places the students within one of the developmental stages and thus assists the trainer who must then tailor the pre-departure training to the developmental stages of the students.



Figure 4. Sample IDI individual reading.

This initial results of the IDI 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.

3.2 Pre-departure Training

The pre-departure training focuses 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). Each institution prepares a training plan with clear outcomes for the training session based on the IDI test results. It is important for the students to be aware of their developmental orientation in order for them to become motivated and acquire the knowledge necessary through the pre-departure training. Interestingly enough, a pattern has started to appear which places many of the participants in the same stage: minimisation. This tendency needs to be further studied and analysed as it can help trainers pre-plan their courses.

3.3 The Reflection Platform

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, intensify and most importantly, practice this skill. In the project, the online communication scenario Interfection provides the framework for guided self-reflection during the work placement. Culture here incorporates the national, ethnic but also organizational, business sector and/or gender-related environment in the sense of Hofstede's [15] "collective programming of the mind that distinguishes people from one group or category of people from others." This Online Communication Scenario is based on the model developed in the national Leonardo da Vinci II Project Skills. In the SKILL2E model, a set of guided questions are the focal point of the diary/blog which permits the students to answer reflecting upon their observations, experiences and impressions. It is expected that these strategic interventions would enable reiterated conscious decisions with respect to trialling context- appropriate behaviour (active experimentation) during the transnational placement (concrete experience).

3.4 Cultural Mentoring

Cultural mentors are a key component of the SKILL2E concept. The mentors are meant to help interns adjust not only to the enterprise but also to their new culture. Cultural mentoring is one of the possible strategies that can be applied in cross-cultural work environments. It is important for mentors to recognize how group processes are impacted by culture and how intercultural communication impacts on behaviour. This awareness is necessary for the work placement to be beneficial for both the mentor and the intern.

4. Conclusion

The SKILL2E concept addresses many issues: cultural competence gain, assessment, training and cultural mentoring. This combination of elements was considered essential for achieving sustainability as learners were addressed in various ways and thus engagement could be intensified. This sustainable learning needs to be grounded in sound theory that pays heed to a competence-based approach. Accordingly, the learning outcomes in SKILL2E 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. In short, the SKILL2E concept 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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