

The Transcultural Journey

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The pursuit and search for the buried treasures of knowledge calls for a unique combination of abilities, for the explorer-excavator must be traveler, detective, and scholar at the same time. It is, perhaps, the most exciting of all intellectual pursuits.

John Garstang, *In Pursuit of Knowledge*

Ready or not, a “transcultural” era is upon us. The dramatic expansion of airline travel and telecommunications technologies, tourism and student exchanges, immigration policies and trade agreements have served to connect vastly different peoples and places into increasingly complex relationships. Local, regional, and national economies are now largely integrated into a single interdependent economy, working in real time on a global scale. Buyers and sellers increasingly connect, not through physical proximity, but through electronic networks. At the same time, everything and everyone appears to be on the move. Capital and commodities, products and services, businesspersons and migrants, tourists and terrorists — all move across borders with relative freedom.

These global transformations are being felt at an intensely local level. Travel writer Pico Iyer documents a typical day in this new intermingled world:

I wake up to the sound of my Japanese clock radio, put on a T-shirt sent me by an uncle in Nigeria and walk onto the street, past German cars, to my office. Around me are English-language students from Korea, Switzerland and Argentina — all on this Spanish-named road in this Mediterranean-style town. On TV, I find, the news is in Mandarin; today’s baseball game is being broadcast in Korean. For lunch I can walk to a sushi bar, a tandoori palace, a Thai café, or the newest burrito joint (run by an old Japanese lady). Who am I, I sometimes wonder. . . and where am I? I am, as it happens, in Southern California, in a quiet, relatively uninternational town, but I could as easily be in Vancouver or Sydney or London or Hong Kong (1993, 86).

Today, who we are (by birth) and where we are (by choice) is not as relevant as it once was. More persons than ever before are pursuing lives that link the local and the global. They are becoming increasingly transcultural —

physically or electronically connected with diverse peoples, and involved in decision-making that is influenced by, and in turn influences, the affairs of a global society. Transcultural persons may be sustained through transnational corporations, grassroots organizations, professional societies, and advocacy groups. But they are also identified at the level of simple, cross-cultural friendships made with residents of local communities.

Transculturalism is rooted in the quest to define shared interests and common values across cultural and national borders. At its best, it comes to the forefront in transnational efforts to address consequential global issues such as personal prejudice, group violence, environmental protection, and human rights. The work of Doctors Without Borders (DWB) is one example. Founded in 1971 by a group of French doctors who believed that the needs of people supersede allegiance to national borders, DWB is “an international independent medical humanitarian organization that delivers emergency aid to people affected by armed conflict, epidemics, natural and man-made disasters.”¹

Effective personal and collective responses to complex quality-of-life issues have always depended upon some level of cultural awareness. Today, however, competence of a transcultural kind must exhibit the attitudes and abilities that facilitate open and ethical interaction with people across cultures. For this, we need not travel far. Like Iyer’s “day in the life,” the experience of other worlds can happen within our own neighborhoods. Today, local resources of interculturally-proficient persons have never been greater.

Any worthy destination requires that a traveler have the necessary orientation. In an attempt to plot the course toward transcultural competence, this essay presents 10 organizing propositions as a cognitive “map” to guide the path of learner development. Each proposition is accompanied by its own set of learner competencies which describe concrete changes learners can expect along the way. The competencies themselves fall into six broad categories:

1. Perspective consciousness: the ability to question constantly the source of one’s cultural assumptions and ethical judgments, leading to the habit of seeing things through the minds and hearts of others.
2. Ethnographic skill: the ability to observe carefully social behavior, manage stress, and establish friendships across cultures, while exploring issues of global significance, documenting learning, and analyzing data using relevant concepts.
3. Global awareness: a basic awareness of transnational conditions and systems, ideologies and institutions, affecting the quality of life of

human and non-human populations, along with the choices confronting individuals and nations.

4. World learning: direct experience with contrasting political histories, family lifestyles, social groups, arts, religions, and cultural orientations based on extensive, immersed interaction within non-English speaking, non-Americanized environments.
5. Foreign language proficiency: a threshold-level facility in the spoken, non-verbal, and written communication system used by members of at least one other culture.
6. Affective development: the capacity to demonstrate personal qualities and standards “of the heart” (e.g., empathy, inquisitiveness, initiative, flexibility, humility, sincerity, gentleness, justice, and joy) within specific intercultural contexts in which one is living and learning.

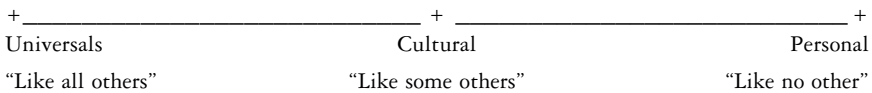
This model proposes an attainable ideal, the transculturally-competent person. It suggests that the process for realizing this ideal must take learners beyond the traditional classroom. Although the classroom provides valuable space for structured presentations of knowledge and group reflection, it does not simulate cultural conditions in real space and time. For this, the transcultural learner must move from the classroom to the community, engaging oneself in the kind of fieldwork that is immersed, immediate, and emotional. In particular, it invites learners to bring their knowledge of relationships within their own culture to the process of cultivating relationships across cultures. The experience of doing so, especially as independent learners, opens up opportunities for acquiring a set of personal attitudes, social sensitivities, and intellectual skills that are rarely, if ever, realized in the regular classroom.

This approach to intercultural learning borrows heavily from the received wisdom of social anthropology, intercultural communication, and international education. Practitioners in all three fields step outside of their own worlds and immerse themselves in the worlds of others in order to explore the way humans, in a wide range of conditions, live or have lived. While we expect that learners will develop a number of the personal skills and orientations that have distinguished specialists in these fields, there is no intention of turning them into anthropologists or intercultural experts. Our aim is more modest: to cultivate a new way of seeing the world, and thus, of understanding ourselves.

Proposition One:

We share a common humanity and transcendent reality with all others.

As a field of practice, anthropology has broadly concerned itself with the human condition: what humans are, what humans do, and the problems that confront them. By investigating these matters among all peoples in all times and places, anthropologists have helped the rest of us understand and respond to human predicaments from something more than a parochial perspective. One of their great insights is summed up in the oft-quoted remark of Clyde Kluckhohn: “All people are like all others, like some others, and like no other.”



In other words, if we were to place all human behavior on a continuum, at one extreme end would be those that apply to everyone, everywhere. This is usually referred to as “human nature” or universals. Examples would include eating, family life, language, and clothing. “Eating,” per se is not French, Icelandic or Ethiopian; it’s merely human. Of course, when we examine *how* we eat, *what* we eat, and *where* we eat, that’s when we begin to appreciate the distinctly *cultural* ways that particular groups satisfy the universal need to eat.

At the opposite end of the behavioral continuum lies the *personal*. While shared assumptions, beliefs and values guarantee that people from the same culture will be similar in many ways, the fact that each group member chooses what elements of the culture to accept and what to reject means that no two people from the same culture will be identical. Every person is in part a product of culture and in part a product of one’s own unique life experiences.

Professional study of the ways in which we are “like *some* others” (the cultural) and “like *no* other” (the personal) was originally intended to shed light on our common humanity. In practice, however, social scientists have given much more attention to our differences than to our similarities. Cultural investigators must rely upon the constancy in human nature across all ethnic and language groups to do their work. In fact, elements of a universal human nature are quite obvious, and include, among other things, the life cycle, the division of labor by sex and age, social networks, language as the principal

medium of communication, and the display of emotion through facial expressions and gestures. Additionally, all people everywhere understand logic, hold aesthetic standards, distinguish between right and wrong, and make moral judgments. They also maintain membership in the various institutions necessary for human flourishing, such as marriage and family, education, religion, economics, government, and health

These universals take many local, wildly different forms and defy any single, overarching explanation. Nevertheless, they point to the existence of a deep structure underlying the world's order and the nature of humanity. Contrary to those who consider persons as being little more than empty but programmable minds, human nature includes a complex set of functional capacities — of intellect and imagination, of emotion and experience, and of self-determination. While developed and expressed within the physical and social environments in which persons live, these capacities of personality make possible individuality and moral character.

What this means for transcultural development is that our universal human nature is our primary identity, one more fundamental than any particular identity forged on the basis of a person's nationality, race, gender, or ethnicity. The implications are radically egalitarian and universalistic. All human beings are of equal value and deserving of fair recognition, mutual respect, humane treatment, and equal opportunities for self-realization. Part of this respect is accorded to the innate creative capacity of persons — their universal human potential — distinct from anything they may make of it or is capable of making of it.

The acknowledgment of a universal human nature also suggests that we take seriously both the objective and subjective nature of human knowledge. We are, no doubt, incapable of comprehending the whole of reality. And it is certainly true that human perceptions and identities are tied to external realities, are culturally and historically conditioned. But the relationship of the personal to the external does not entail a one-to-one correspondence. Our understanding of the categories of reality and myth, truth and falsehood, good and evil may be finite and partial, but the categories themselves remain universal and absolute.² Transcultural development begins with the realization that, amidst the diversity of cultural expression, we share common human potential and experience. From here, we discover the ways that others make sense of their world. In so doing we expand the range of alternative mores and manners, values and visions that are available to us for running our lives.

Learner Competencies for Proposition One

- Articulate aspects of a common humanity connecting oneself to members of the host society (e.g., personal adaptation to physical and social environment, biological and psychological needs, spiritual concerns and aspirations).
- Explain the underlying oneness of human beings in relation to the ways different peoples produce different “maps” of reality.
- Articulate a working definition of “culture” using a limited number of relevant terms, principles, and concepts.
- Explain one’s own perceptions and practices, and that of select members of the host culture, in terms of the cultural, social, economic, and political factors that shape them.
- Demonstrate the ability to compare in one’s own culture and the host culture how basic human needs (e.g., to eat, to socialize, to seek meaning) are satisfied in different ways.

Proposition Two:

We are inescapably marked by the particularities of the circumstances in which we are born and raised.

At the root of each person’s capacity for forming and defining their own identity lies the complex interplay between self and community. Individuals are never reducible to the social circumstances in which they develop but are indelibly marked by them. In a personal communication to Senator Daniel Moynihan, James Q. Wilson noted that,

Erecting walls that separate “us” from “them” is a necessary correlate to morality since it defines the scope within which sympathy, fairness, and duty operate. The chief wall is the family/clan/village, but during certain historical periods, ethnicity defines the wall. The great achievement of Western culture since the Enlightenment is to make many of us peer over the wall and grant some respect to people outside it; the great failure of Western culture is to deny that walls are inevitable or important (1997, xiv).

These walls enable us to stand somewhere — as Arab or Israeli, Hindu or Muslim, woman or man. Erected at birth, they define the social locations that profoundly shape our sense of self. They orient us to a complex process of

“taking in” and “keeping out” certain people, experiences, and perspectives. They result in self-identities that establish the boundaries of our beings.

Our socially-situated and -shaped selves are multifaceted, divided among a number of alternative and sometimes competing identities. It is impossible to dismiss the fact that we exist as part of multiple intersecting “microcultures” of gender, race, social class, and ethnicity, offering particular experiences, values, and perspectives. It is likely that a minimum-wage-earning, first-generation, Mexican immigrant woman in Los Angeles will look at life differently from a professionally-trained, fourth-generation German immigrant male in Chicago. Individuals may have diverse social identities (e.g., “rich white female”), and also possess hybrid ethnic identities (e.g., “Japanese-Indian”). This is especially evident in modern societies where social spaces overlap and change, making possible an almost infinite variety of identity definitions. This matter is further complicated in the case of migrants, refugees, exiles, and nomads who grow up in several cultures, or in the spaces between them. Many find it difficult to answer the question, “Where do you come from?”

We are living through an era of intense economic, political and cultural change, and even those of us who may never leave home are subject to unbidden forces challenging us to think of ourselves in new, unfixed ways. Transcultural learners can see themselves as the vanguard of an increasing swath of humanity that must be able to move in and out of daily contexts where nationalities, languages, ethnicities, and classes coexist.

The expatriates of old were defined by one sending-country and one dominant set of cultural experiences. The emerging epoch will increasingly demand transpatriates — persons who move between the

multiple cultures, fashioning identities that are dynamic and porous. The test of transculturalism is to think outside the box of one’s motherland, seeing many sides of every question without abandoning conviction, and allowing for a chameleon sense of self without losing one’s cultural center.

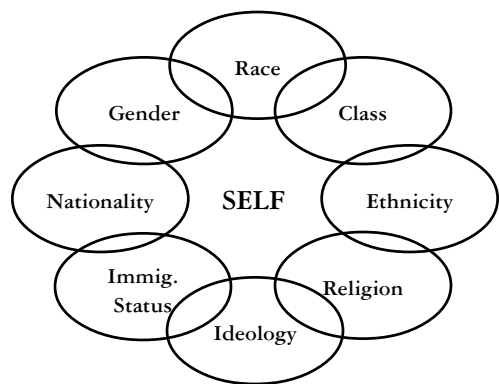


Figure 1

Learner Competencies for Proposition Two

- Identify oneself as a “member” of multiple, intersecting “micro-cultural” groups, each one with relatively more or less economic and political power and social prestige within one’s home culture.
- Demonstrate an awareness of oneself as a culturally conditioned human being with languages, perceptions, interpretations, preferences, and daily habits formed out of one’s total life experience.
- Demonstrate an awareness of one’s own reactions (e.g. fear, discomfort, judgment, disgust) to linguistic, racial, cultural, ideological, and class differences.
- Demonstrate an awareness of ethnic, class, religious, ideological and linguistic differences within the host society.
- Provide and compare basic information about one’s own culture (general history, geography, sociology, family life, politics, and religion) and that of the host society.
- Demonstrate knowledge of the various “themes” — like language, work, leisure, time and space, social hierarchies — that exhibit the dominant values, beliefs, customs, and behavioral norms of one’s own culture and that of the host society.

Proposition Three:

Truth is too big for any single individual or culture to contain.

Each of our national and cultural heritages is precious, a gift to enrich others in the world. The best of the American experience, for example, has offered the world constitutionalism, the rule of law, democracy, minority rights, technological innovation, and free markets, just to name a few. These “treasures” are ingrained in the American character; to be freed of them is neither possible nor desirable. At the same time, the very particularity of our cultural experience is what limits our knowing, and renders the truth contained in our perspectives and positions partial at best. This is why we must enter into the thinking of those shaped by *other* cultural and political traditions. Only by doing so can we move toward broader knowledge and fuller truth. Years of international living and teaching has convinced Bernard Adeney of the same:

Truth is often bigger than any one person’s ability to grasp it. By recognizing the particularity of all our knowing, we are free to look for

wisdom in opposing opinions without compromising what is valuable in our own. As we begin to love people in another culture, we can begin to identify with them and see the truth they understand. As we make their truth our own, we become new people, formed by the synthesis of two cultures (1995, 165).

This “new person” necessarily arises out of the old character formed through our childhood socialization. It is through that training process that we all learn to *absolutize* our own way of life (take it to represent what is true, right and good), and then to *universalize* it (make it the standard by which all else is judged). We’re not alone: this impulse infects all groups and operates largely on a subconscious level. Unfortunately, it tends to shut down authentic openness to other sources of truth and goodness, and leaves one stuck in one’s own prejudices.

Each of our transcultural journeys entails the “suspension” of these prejudices, at least long enough to mine the treasures resident in the traditions of others. Like a plant, the transcultural learner reaches down into the soil of each culture, drawing out elements that can nourish a broader self-identity founded on more universal virtues and values. However, the transcultural journey always involves something more than merely acquiring knowledge *about* the other. It requires, first of all, a readiness to recognize the true, the good, and the beautiful wherever it is found. Then it calls us to feel the pull of another on our way of seeing the world, to regard the other as potentially right, and perhaps to have him or it prevail against us.

Learner Competencies for Proposition Three

- Identify several contributions (technologies, beliefs, institutions, languages) made by one’s own culture and by the host culture to the “global treasury” of human culture through history.
- Demonstrate humility: the recognition of one’s own limitations and imperfections, along with a respect for the varied and complex nature of human experience.
- Demonstrate respect towards diverse others: the ability to accept individuals and their groups as unique expressions of specific character qualities in varying degrees of maturity.
- Demonstrate sincerity: a genuine interest in others and their life ways as potential sources of companionship, wisdom, and collaboration.

Proposition Four:

Movement “outside the box” of our cultural experience is not natural.

The fact is, thinking and acting “outside the box” of our own cultural experience is not natural. What *are* natural are prejudice and provincialism, ethnocentrism and exclusion. We “naturally” prefer ‘our own kind’ over ‘the other,’ and tend to consider the limits of our own field of vision as the limits of the world. We should understand this temptation toward ethnocentrism as tied to our existential condition. Not only are we limited by the finiteness of our knowing, but our very knowing is distorted by the claims and prejudices of our racial, national, and socio-economic identities. To believe that one’s own group is right and must be defended provides human beings with their most effective defense against threat. As a result, groups have tended to be more arrogant, hypocritical, and ruthlessly self-seeking than individuals. Reinhold Niebuhr explains this in terms of how national pride compensates for specific forms of inferiority and insecurity from which all individuals suffer: “Collective pride is thus man’s last, and in some respects most pathetic, effort to deny the determinate and contingent character of his existence” (1964, 213).

Thus, a parochial outlook on life can be seen as a basic human survival response. At birth we begin to identify with what sustains us — our families, our cultural community, our nation. We want to be different, to transcend our “natural” selves, but end up preferring what is “natural” to us. C.S. Lewis captures this sentiment with characteristic clarity:

We want to be more than ourselves. Yet each of us by nature sees the whole world from one point of view with a perspective and selectiveness peculiar to him self. We want to see with other eyes, to imagine with other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as with our own. But we find that the primary impulse is to maintain and aggrandize ourselves. The secondary impulse is to go out of self, to correct its provincialism, and heal its loneliness (1992, 137-141).

Lewis distills a primary goal of our transcultural journeys — to open windows to reality outside ourselves, and to discover that other groups exist as something other than the “inferior,” much less the “enemy.” If we dare to question our own prejudices, it is possible to accept others as they are without comparing them to or judging them against ourselves. This process will inevitably enable us to deal with our national pride, our false attachments,

and our personal insecurities. It's a "conversion" of sorts — the process of being delivered from self-absorption and being opened to a bigger, more complex understanding of the world, and thereby of ourselves.

Learner Competencies for Proposition Four

- Articulate an awareness of the partiality of one's perspectives and moral judgments.
- Demonstrate an awareness of the tendency to glorify one's own cultural and national identities, and to misperceive and misjudge others.
- Demonstrate an awareness of the manner in which community members and groups are viewed or perceived by oneself.
- Describe oneself in relation to an intercultural development model where one progresses from "ethnocentrism" to "ethnorelativism."³

Proposition Five:

Conflicts between groups result, to a large extent, from social and cultural disregard.

The instinct to absolutize and aggrandize our way of life can be seen as a primary cause of some of the world's worst suffering. Samuel Huntington, in his 1993 *Foreign Affairs* essay "The Clash of Civilizations?" predicted that "the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural." Huntington went on to suggest that the chief cultural fault lines in the post-Cold War world would occur between the West and, predictably, Islam and Confucianism, (i.e.: oil and Chinese exports). Of the two, Islam would pose the gravest threat. No doubt much of the Muslim *umma* (the international Islamic community) perceives itself as a civilization besieged by modernity generally, and by the social and economic consequences of US foreign policy in particular. These factors provide backdrop to the contemporary "age of Muslim wars," which according to Huntington, "has its roots in more general causes [which] ... lie in politics, not seventh-century religious doctrines."⁴

Huntington's more recent focus on political offenses complicates the widely endorsed view that conflicts between peoples result from irreconcilably different value systems symbolized by religion. Taken together, his analysis underscores the fact that much of the intense frustration and rabid anti-American sentiments held in many parts of the Muslim world are partly fueled by

patterns of political coercion and cultural disregard. Since the identities of persons are partially shaped by recognition from others,

...a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being (Taylor, 1992, 25).

This is the case both between and within nations. Where extreme imbalances of economic, cultural and political power exist, groups that perceive themselves the victim rarely remain still and silent. In Bosnia, nationalists speaking the language of self-determination began to re-write history and re-imagine cultural tradition, turning “the narcissisms of minor differences into the monstrous fable that people on either side were genocidal killers” (Ignatieff, 1993, 3). In this case (and many others), a given group identity ascribed by birth (e.g., religion, ethnicity) is chosen as one’s terminal identity and used tactically to achieve greater equality.

International cases are mirrored by the historical experience of minority groups inhabiting the United States. Until recent decades, immigrants were expected to improve their quality of life through a process of educational and economic advancement and cultural assimilation (the removal of differences between hosts and new arrivals). This conformist ideology encouraged non-mainstream group members to “melt” into a mythical Anglo-Saxon Protestant world by surrendering their first languages, cultures, and identities. As a result, group members were alienated from their family and community, and marginalized within the national civic culture. Even after acquiring the language and culture of the Anglo mainstream, they were oftentimes denied inclusion and full participation into the civic culture because of their racial characteristics.

Whether conducted across the globe or across the street, we should expect our transcultural journeys to highlight the fact that self-identities can be damaged by either a society withholding recognition or by projecting an inferior or demeaning image upon another. Women of color, American Muslims, or Native Americans may tell of being induced to adopt a deprecatory image of themselves as “weaker,” “culturally inferior,” or “uncivilized.” Hearing such stories can be deeply unsettling, especially if we identify with dominant groups. But our personal discomfort and defensive reactions can lead to a wider horizon *if* we first recognize their source: the culturally inbred, deeply held, yet

unexamined beliefs we all hold towards the other. This is the necessary first step toward appreciating, if not actively supporting, efforts made by others to purge themselves of an imposed, distorted, and debilitating identity.

Learner Competencies for Proposition Five

- Demonstrate an awareness of how one is seen (e.g., as an outsider) by members of the host culture.
- Articulate the historical conditions by which particular groups have become “stranger” to ourselves, either in our home society or in the host society.
- Demonstrate the ability to reflect on the character and identity of others as emerging out of their group history, life experiences, and present-day circumstances.
- Demonstrate an awareness of how subordinate groups in the host society employ ethnic signs and symbols to resist oppression and assert a distinctive identity.

Proposition Six:

The future of the world is urban and multicultural, though increasingly unequal.

One of the greatest social dramas of our time is the movement of people from their ancestral homelands to new destinations. Some are pulled by the prospect of employment, educational opportunity, and adventure; others are pushed by war, religious persecution, and natural disaster. Nobody knows how many others are smuggled, along with drugs and weapons, in shipping containers, automobile trunks, and airplane hulls. What is clear, however, is that the majority are heading for cities.

When the 20th century began scarcely 14 % of humans lived in cities; by the time it ended that figure had risen to 50%. United Nations officials predict the trend to intensify and have dubbed the 21st century the “century of cities.” What is often romantically described as a “global village” — small-scale, interdependent, and internationalized — is actually much closer to a “global city” that is unbounded, fragmented, and rootless. The planet’s future, for better or for worse, is being played out in cities as different as London, Lagos, and Los Angeles. What they share in common is a mosaic of their nation’s (if not the world’s) cultures and classes, along with a deepening inequality between them.

The relentless expansion of these urban centers reflects, in part, a widening economic gap. Los Angeles hosts people from over 140 different countries, speaking over 100 different languages. Yet underneath its polychrome exterior, and in common with other world cities, it endures a deepening inequality. Area growth is increasingly socially and economically polarized, with communities of affluence virtually contiguous with pockets of poverty and crime. Many community residents have little access to quality public schools and decent-paying jobs. Limited education, poverty and joblessness reverberate in the form of pathologically high levels of family breakdown, welfare dependency, homelessness, criminal (especially street gang) activity, and despair.

The so-called linking of the planet through mass migration, global trade, and electronic communications has, in fact, intensified the distance between people. The UN estimates that the richest 358 people in the world have a financial worth as great as 2.3 billion others, while in the US, the most wired man in the country (Bill Gates) has a net worth larger than that of 40 percent of the country's households (or 100 million of his compatriots). This level of economic inequality has not been known since the gilded age and has never been more accentuated than in modern world-class cities. Nation-states in which such world cities operate face the dual challenge of recognizing the racial, cultural and religious communities within their societies as assets toward building national unity, and of reducing the economic disparity between them.

In the final analysis, these political and economic dilemmas can only be adequately addressed through persons and policies that recognize that our destinies are intertwined, and that choices to harm our neighbor actually end up harming ourselves. Transcultural learners are challenged to develop thoughtful and clarified identifications, not only as members of particular cultural and national communities, but also as global citizens who understand that their neighbor is everyone alive. In a world that daily grows smaller, and in which everyone's problems are everyone else's, transcultural understanding will become the only place where peace can find a home. Toward this end, our journeys begin with cross-cultural conversation and aim for empathetic understanding.

The capacity to "put oneself in another's shoes"—to apprehend their point of view and felt experiences—is prerequisite to finally taking responsibility as citizens of the global community. For the most part, national cultures today are divided and polarized over a variety of domestic concerns. The way is open for those with transcultural experience and understanding to offer

alternative interpretations and truly radical responses to predicaments (like conflict and war, the AIDS/HIV pandemic, and global warming) that affect us at a transnational level.

Learner Competencies for Proposition Six

- Demonstrate a valuing of “downward mobility” as a lifestyle of personal involvement with the people and problems of distressed communities.
- Demonstrate the ability to identify choices and alternative actions in relation to specific community problems.
- Articulate one’s own beliefs regarding the sources and solutions of various global problems (e.g., climate change, economic disparity, conflict and violence).
- Identify alternative beliefs and relevant information in the host culture that could be used to imagine alternative ways of addressing transnational issues or problems.
- Articulate a view of oneself that balances cultural, national, and global identifications and commitments.

Proposition Seven:

Movement from a merely local vision to a more global vision requires an exodus.

In the book of Genesis, God issues a command to Abraham: “Go forth from your *country* and your *kindred* and your *father’s house* to the land that I will show you.” Abraham is suddenly confronted with the choice of either staying with his native country and his “home” culture and family, or, departing and becoming a blessing to “all the families of the earth.” If he is to make a contribution from something beyond a merely parochial perspective, he cannot stay; he must leave, making a break with the ties that profoundly define him.

Transcultural learners, like Abraham, take leave of an exclusive loyalty to their home culture. This “leaving” is easily misunderstood and has many counterfeits. Some confuse it with incessant roaming or tourism. Others misread it as an attempt to “go native” — that is, to lose all that we are and believe by uncritically absorbing the host culture. Leaving can also be construed as an evacuation out of a world of difference into a “bubble” of homogeneous life, whether in some walled-and-gated compound at home or in an expatriate colony abroad.

A true exodus should not be seen as primarily geographical, but rather as cultural, psychological and spiritual. At its center is the intentional crossing of borders of difference in order to understand another's reality from *their* point of view. Is it possible for a white to "think black?" Can an American "think Chinese?" Can the financially secure "think homeless?" The answers are found, above all, in our willingness to cross over creatively into multicultural spheres where different histories, languages, experiences, and perspectives intermingle amid diverse relations of power and privilege. In so doing, we cross the "border" from personal identity to *mutuality*. We enter the world of another to listen, to hear, and to receive. We walk a while in their mind and emotions. We try to believe, feel, and think as they do.

The natural tendency is either to *turn away* from the other or to try to *change* the other. To *cross over* into another's ideas and feelings might prove difficult, even threatening. It demands accepting the risks and uncertainties associated with not "keeping to oneself." Above all, it presents a challenge to care enough about the other person to be divested of standing opinions and convictions, at least temporarily. This opens the way for an enlarged self to be formed in relation to one's own culture, this new culture, and that unique third culture that eventually forms on the boundary between the two.

Learner Competencies for Proposition Seven

- Demonstrate a readiness to open oneself up to experiences and influences within the host culture without always seeking isolation or the company of co-patriots.
- Describe the cultural adjustment process, along with personal examples of those phenomena associated with it (e.g., anxiety, disconfirming expectations, ambiguity, and confrontation with one's prejudices).
- Demonstrate the ability to deal with the "negative" emotions (e.g., impatience, frustration, anger, defeat), as well as the pleasures, associated with participating in unfamiliar and stress-producing settings.
- Demonstrate a willingness to take on various roles as appropriate to both formal contexts (e.g., as an observer-listener at a *campesino* rights organization) and informal contexts (e.g., as an informal interviewer within a local host family).

Proposition Eight:

At the center of the transcultural journeys, strangers become our guides.

In order to enlarge our understanding of reality, we must step outside the boundaries of our situated selves and repeatedly cross into the world of the “stranger.” Consider Dorothy, in *Wizard of Oz*. Transported by a tornado from her house in Kansas to Oz, all is well except Dorothy is homesick for Kansas. Her only way home is to find the Wizard of Oz, and she begins a journey that follows the classic lines of the archetypal “heroes journey” (Campbell, 1972). Dorothy, a terrified hero, sets out on a mundane but dangerous road looking for the Wizard. Along the way, she encounters three companions — a scarecrow, a cowardly lion, and a tin man. Each of these three “strangers” represents for Dorothy an unknown and ambiguous figure. Will they prove friend or foe? Will they guide her or somehow use her? Her trepidation is understandable: she never met such characters in Kansas, and they pose a real challenge to the familiar constructs of her personal world. Dorothy steps into the unknown and opens herself up to them, even as they open themselves up to her. Dorothy’s personal vulnerability is rewarded with unforeseen allies and true companions. As they journey together, she discovers that she is not all that different from them. She encounters the familiar in the unfamiliar, the known in the unknown, her own self in these three others, and the three others in her own self. Ultimately, she reaches the Wizard, her wish is granted, and she returns home. Dorothy awakens in her bed, as if the whole experience in Oz was just a dream.

At the center of our transcultural journeys is the act of becoming a stranger in the world of those persons who, in turn, consent to be our cultural mentors. As we allow the voices and perceptions of others to resonate within ourselves, we position ourselves to receive and embrace the virtues and values that shape a more universal character. It may be the passionate devotion and moral discipline of a Muslim cleric; the simplicity and tranquil detachment of a Buddhist monk; the emblematic politeness and punctuality of a Japanese businessman; the extravagant hospitality of a Hindu villager; or the quiet courage expressed by an AIDS orphan. In the life of every stranger lies something of the universal. It is for us to harvest it.

Learner Competencies for Proposition Eight

- Describe a limited set of independent language- and culture-learning techniques.

- Demonstrate the ability to form relationships of equality with others of both sexes and of diverse ethnic, socio-economic, and religious backgrounds through meaningful dialogue and appropriate self-disclosure.
- Demonstrate the ability to acquire local knowledge through systematic observation, informant interviewing, active listening, fieldnote writing, and structured reflection.
- Demonstrate an effort to communicate in the host language with appropriate body language and sociocultural etiquette.
- Demonstrate “double vision” — i.e., the capacity to see common realities through another’s eyes and life experience.

Proposition Nine:

Transcultural journeys help give birth to a new self.

One of the luxuries afforded by travel is the opportunity to lose ourselves, at least temporarily, only to find ourselves anew. One person is left behind, while another person begins to emerge out of one thousand and one things seen in a different light and experienced from a different angle. The person we once were seems to fall away to reveal a new version of ourselves that is higher and more self-aware. This metamorphosis often comes by way of encounters with strangers, persons we meet by chance, but who dare to hold up a mirror to ourselves, not just the person we have known, but also the one we might have been, or are on the road to becoming.

As noted previously, we naturally tend to identify with some and reject others, to externalize fears, to protect privilege. Any effort to transcend these reflexes requires that we first claim the cultural baggage that we unconsciously carry along into intercultural encounters. We might begin by asking ourselves: “How is my sense of self tied to my gender, my family’s social class, and my ethnic heritage? How has my racial identity been formed along North American fault lines along which power, prestige, and respect are distributed? How did they, together, bestow upon me a mother tongue, a worldview, and preferred ways of dressing, eating, and speaking? And how do my various “social locations” affect my attitude towards the racially and economically different within my hometown or in regions beyond? If I find I’m resistant to this kind of self-reflection, what might that tell me?”

This inward journey commences prior to our outward journeys. Being a transcultural learner is not first about our outward-moving actions to study language, collect cultural information, or deliver development services. It is foremost about *how* we go about these activities, and the character of our own personal life in the process. That character doesn't develop by boarding a plane or arriving at a distant destination. Rather, it grows when we each take leave of cultural loyalties that obstruct our willingness to embrace host community members in ways not expected of the casual tourist. Such an embrace begins by opening our arms wide to the people — desiring our self not to remain isolated culturally, but for community members to be a part of us, and us of them. This embrace is mutual and sincere, but also soft.

I may not close my arms around the other too tightly, so as to crush her and assimilate her, otherwise I will be engaged in a concealed power-act of exclusion; an embrace would be perverted into a “bear-hug.” Similarly, I must keep the boundaries of my own self firm, offer resistance; otherwise I will be engaged in a self-destructive act of abnegation (Volf, 1996, 143).

In each of our journeys we seek to maintain a conscious awareness of our self as a “center,” a cultural being ultimately responsible for its own thoughts and behaviors. This provides us a stable root for our identity apart from our fluctuating mental, emotional, and physical states. We think new *and* old thoughts. We experience new *and* old emotions. We react to new physical conditions and cope with cultural behaviors that unsettle and confuse us without spinning out of control. Having come to terms with the various forces that have shaped our own identity, we prove especially sensitive to the effects of racism, economic exploitation, political oppression, religious prejudice — or the absence of these — in the lives of others.

Learner Competencies for Proposition Nine

- Describe specific ways one has struggled against bigotry, stereotyping, vilification, persecution, exclusion, and oppression within one's home culture.
- Demonstrate an awareness of the privileges and prerogatives that generally attach to one's skin color, nationality, native language, social class, or religion that are not available in either kind or degree to most members of the host society.

- Demonstrate an awareness of responses to one's social identities (e.g., racial, cultural, national) by members of the host society.
- Demonstrate the ability to identify simultaneously with one's own culture *and* with members of the host culture so as to form positive relationships while maintaining psychological well-being.

Proposition Ten:

Transcultural journeys entail cultural experimentation and appreciation, as well as critical evaluation.

Our willingness to transcend the boundaries of our inherited identity opens us up to the good, the true, and the beautiful in each person and cultural tradition. The transcultural learner brings to their journeys, first of all, a universal attitude capable of gathering up any trait, any truth, any teaching — in any culture — and then of assimilating that into a more global character. This attitude naturally presents in cultural experimentation, the risking of new (and perhaps contradictory) roles, beliefs, and feelings. In India, for example, we might learn to wear a sari, eat with our hands, clean ourselves with water after defecating, sit cross-legged for two hours at a time, understand caste relations, practice meditation, speak Hindi, cope with the discomfort of heat and dust, and value people over projects. “Trying on” these new attitudes and behaviors leads us to new experiences, new relationships, new perspectives, and new identifications.

Outside of deep, ongoing, and appreciative involvement in local cultural life, we tend to frame and interpret events erroneously. Some of us lapse into classic ethnocentrism: taking a standard or meaning from our “home” culture and using it to describe events in the “host” culture (e.g., “These people eat with their fingers and squat to use the toilet... how backward!”). Although we all tend to value our own ways above those of others, ethnocentrism prevents us from understanding, much less appreciating, those ways that are different from our own. This appreciation must be learned; few travelers automatically explore beneath the surface forms — those “irrational” beliefs, the “funny sounding” language, the “enmeshed” family life, the “irritating” music, and the “strange” customs — to the deep meanings held by the people. To the contrary, most of us are quick to judge those forms as inferior or defective parts of the other's cultural system. This is oftentimes a quick defense against what seems to be the only alternative: a total tolerance for every perspective and practice.

Committing ourselves to understanding meanings in the other people's terms does not mean that we abandon any basis for evaluating the moral adequacy of cultural belief and behavior. For the transcultural learner, respect for cultural diversity does not imply that "anything goes." The reason is readily apparent to any honest observer. Once the presumption of equal value has been made toward the life ways of others, and once our own cultural biases have been relativized through cross-cultural encounters, we inevitably confront a disturbing fact: All of existence does not contribute equally. Not all diversity *is* worthy of respect.

For example, can we respect the beliefs that led Chinese leaders to massacre dissenting students in Tiananmen Square? Should we seek to appropriate Confucianism's fabled indifference to anyone outside a given family group, Latin American political intolerance, and Western European nihilism? Do we condone as morally-neutral certain features of American cultural history: the genocidal attacks on Native Americans, two centuries of literal human slavery, the forced internment of Japanese-Americans during the Second World War, and political support for the ruthless Trujillo, Somoza, Marcos, Pol Pot, Hussein, Duvalier, Sukarno, and South African regimes? How are we to view female genital mutilation in Africa, forced child labor in Nepal, or ritual prostitution in South India? Though some differences must be tolerated, ought they to be respected?

We are forced to acknowledge that, within the wide variety of human experience, some human thinking, valuing, and behaving is loftier than others. Crossing into the worlds of others, certain things will strike me as being loving, true and fair, and things contrary to them as not being loving, true, and fair. I cannot regard both as good, just, or equal. This is not merely because I, as a middle-class, Euro-American male deem it so, but because some thoughts, values, and behaviors are more congruent with a universal moral sense than others.⁵

At the same time, cultural outsiders need to be careful about confronting objectionable practices that are imperfectly understood. What might appear evil from a Western perspective (e.g., caste relations) may perform a vital social function within a given national culture. This is why the criteria for making ethical judgments cannot arise from one culture alone (the familiar error of cultural imperialism). Any effort to appraise culture, depends on authentic intercultural dialogue focused on learning from the other. In fact, our primary aim is not to find a perspective to evaluate our host culture at all, but one that will allow us to see our *own* culture more clearly. We take the beam out of our own eyes so that we can begin to see the speck in our neighbor's.

To summarize: our journey toward more transcultural perspectives must not fail to include a serious attitude toward questions of right and wrong, good and bad, sense and nonsense. These questions naturally emanate from a consciousness shaped by authentic humility, an ever-broadening “horizon” of intercultural awareness, and a commitment to the global good. Critical evaluation, however, presupposes broad cultural experimentation and appreciation. Ultimately it will involve the transcultural learner in respectful moral conversation with friends from within the host culture. Within this context binding values, irrevocable standards, and fundamental moral attitudes come to light for both partners.⁶

Learner Competencies for Proposition Ten

- Demonstrate a willingness to try out new ways of thinking, acting, and interacting within the host culture.
- Demonstrate the ability to “mine” the religion, literature, myths and visual arts of the host culture for insights and perceptions that can elevate one’s own faith, character, and lifestyle.
- Demonstrate intermediate-level facility in the spoken, non-verbal, and written communication system used by members of the host culture.⁷
- Demonstrate the ability to assess the implications and thus the relative value of multiple beliefs, values, and practices based on in-depth moral conversations with members of the host society.
- Demonstrate the ability to apply one’s intercultural understanding, imagination, and communicative proficiency in quality-of-life projects involving transnational collaboration.

Conclusion

We began our discussion of transcultural competence by highlighting the growing interrelatedness of life across borders. Among the lessons of this new reality is that the needs of any nation’s individuals, families and communities can no longer be understood or addressed from a strictly local or national perspective. Thus, citizens must learn to function effectively across a variety of group cultures (racial, ethnic, linguistic, religious/ideological, social class, and gender) both within her or his nation and within other nations. Strengthening such transcultural competence in the national population is perhaps the greatest challenge facing US secondary and post-secondary education. Our nation’s security and prosperity in the days ahead may depend upon it.

The foregoing has attempted to characterize some of the philosophical underpinnings and concrete indicators of transcultural attitudes and abilities. It assumes that we not only know transcultural ability when we see it, but also that transcultural ability is subject to creation through the educational process — that we can create it. This is not to say that we can offer any precise, empirical definition of transcultural competence. It may not clearly describe one thing, but many. In fact, the concept's very range and flexibility may allow it to be approached from a variety of perspectives. Liberal arts colleges, for example, may aim for transcultural student development through a number of internationalization efforts: study abroad, foreign language instruction, ethnic and urban studies, international relations, internships abroad, area studies, international research, scholarly exchange, global studies, and international student services. Each of these “tribes” within global education contributes a critical but limited frame of reference to transcultural competence. At the same time, each individual learner will differ in both the form and the degree of competence they will demonstrate. As Robert Hanvey reminds us:

A global perspective is not a quantum, something you either have or don't have. It is a blend of many things and any given individual may be rich in certain elements and relatively lacking in others. The educational goal, broadly seen, may be to socialize significant collectivities of people so that the important elements of a global perspective are represented in the group (1979, 2).

The challenge we are left with is to leaven significant portions of our lump of citizen-learners with the real-world understandings, intercultural sensitivities, and language abilities that will enable them to take a measure of personal responsibility for making the world a better place. It is here that we must continually ask: “Transcultural competence for what? What international tasks in relation to what global problems will it prepare learners to perform?” Although it is impossible to calculate the full range of tasks that will confront the next generation, addressing problems like poverty, ecology, security, and ethnic strife will require the cooperation of government agencies, private foundations, transnational corporations, and grassroots organizations. And ultimately, the vitality of each of these structures will depend on persons with the capacity to see events from a transcultural perspective and the will to act on behalf of the common good.

Notes

¹ See the Doctors Without Borders web site, <http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/>

² According to James Q. Wilson in *The Moral Sense*, a transcendent moral perception exists, residing in the universal need for communal affiliation.

³ Ethnocentrism is defined as “assuming that the worldview of one’s own culture is central to all reality,” whereas ethnorelativism assumes “that cultures can only be understood relative to one another.” See Milton J. Bennett, “Towards Ethnorelativism: A Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity.” In R.M. Paige, ed. *Cross-Cultural Orientation: New Conceptualizations and Applications*. Landham, MD: University Press of America, 1986.

⁴ These “general causes” include 11 years of US-led economic sanctions and aerial assaults against Iraq which claimed the lives of 500,000 children under the age of five (UNICEF); the US arming of Israel against Palestinian Muslims; and the establishment of US military bases in Saudi Arabia.

⁵ Rushworth Kidder traveled the world to interview leading thinkers, artists, educators, businesspeople, and religious and political leaders, asking each person the same question: “If you could develop a global code of ethics, what would it be?” Based on the 24 interviews, he identified eight universal values. See Rushworth M. Kidder, *Shared Values for a Troubled World* (Jossey-Bass Publishers Inc., 1994).

⁶ The Universal Declaration of a Global Ethic (Hans Kung and Karl-Josef Kuschel, eds., *A Global Ethic*. New York: Continuum, 1993) provides an ecumenical basis on which the great diversity of cultures can be welcomed and cherished, and the claim of any one culture to dominance can be resisted.

⁷ The development of language competence underlies, and is inseparable from, the development of all other competencies. Facility in the local language is linked to knowledge of the local culture through one’s ability to use the language appropriately, as well as through one’s awareness of the specific meanings, values, and connotations of the language. Various instruments evaluate learners’ foreign language skills and cultural awareness. The best of these are not primarily concerned with technical language usage, but actual language use in a variety of social situations. See the assessment scale developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), and adapted versions which appear in Terry Marshall, *The Whole World Guide to Language Learning*. Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, 1989; and Richard Slimbach, *Language Arts*. Monrovia, CA: World Wise Books, 2005.

Suggested Resources

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