Intercultural Dialogue as an Educational Tool in Higher Education

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The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have been characterized by globalization and the migration of population and labor resources. The dynamic changes in different cultures are leading to an increased level of intercultural interactions. New elements of culture and new forms of cultural activities, values, behavior and way of life are emerging in many societies.

One of the more salient components of intercultural interaction is cross-cultural communication, whose aims are the successful adaptation of individuals to a foreign environment. Changes in culture are a result of meetings with the cultural 'other.'

The basic principle of intercultural interaction can be called a plurality of cultures, which we can understand as the active affirmation of cultural diversity and the rights for cultures and members therein to preserve their individuality. A unique problem in the modern world is the formation of tolerance as an active attitude on the basis of recognition for universal human rights and freedoms. The solution of this problem applies to education in large part.

The current generation of university students is very mobile, and during their education they interact with people of different cultures. We use the technique of "cultural immersion," which are used in many countries in preparation for intercultural interaction and the development of useful skills for them. We have employed such techniques here among students at Herzen State University, as well. The first cultural immersion were developed by psychologists of Illinois University in the early 1960's. Cultural immersion consists of descriptions of situations (from 35 to 200), in which characters from two cultures interact. Along with each situation, participants are given four causal interpretations of the observed behaviour. Such situations manifest many of the most important differences between the culture of origin for the newcomer and the culture to which she is working to better comprehend. National stereotypes, distinction of role or relational expectations, customs, and features of nonverbal behavior are very important in the selection of these situations. Special attention is paid to the cultural distinctions that take place in collective or individual action.

Examples of potential conflict situations can be taken from an ethnographic and historical literature, press, observations, and course developers themselves. We especially use the technique of a "critical incident." Participants are asked to recall dramatic events in which something happened (positive or negative) in which they had to changed their opinions about other cultures.

100 students of psychological-pedagogical faculty of Herzen State University have been involved in our research and acculturation programs. Among them are: 90 citizens of Russia; two citizens of Oman; 1citizen of Israel; and 7 citizens of China. Participants were randomly selected for our research groups.

The materials were presented in oral or written text. The unit of analysis was a phrase that contains certain information and the evaluation of the respondents. Interviews with the students from Russia, Oman, Israel, and China showed that the representatives of these countries were insufficiently informed on each other's cultural norms; the level of intercultural awareness was defined as low for all examinees.

Interestingly, the analysis of research revealed that the students had rather precise notions of each other's cultural identity. Their descriptions of native or alien culture were dominated stereotypes, generated in large part by the media. The likely cause of these particular misapprehensions was the lack of personal experience of interaction with 'other.' The partners of student participants in intercultural communication were mostly foreigners who came to Russia for training. Of the 100 students:

- 34 students described their experience of interaction with representatives of another culture as negative.

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- 28 students characterized their experience of dialogue with the foreigners as unexpectedly positive; but they noticed that their expectations from the possible intercultural communication were more negative than positive .
- 38 defined the experience as neutral.

Most students indicated that the lack of foreign language skills impacted their interactions and noted the misunderstanding of their partner's behavior as main reasons of difficulties in intercultural interaction.

As a basis for mutual understanding between different cultures, students pointed out to: having foreign language proficiency, knowledge of traditions, customs, norms of behavior in other cultures, and a general sense of mutual respect.

Thus, on the basis of these trends, it can be concluded that the students had a genuine experience of intercultural interaction: they came away able to at least hypothesize what it would take for positive interactions to occur in the future. At the same time, their stereotypes about foreign cultures were formed by mass media, so the level of their knowledge about intercultural awareness is characterized as low.

Analysis of the results revealed the lack of students' knowledge of cultural characteristics of other countries, and they had several barriers which inhibited certain intercultural interactions. One of the difficulties is an *a priori* perception of foreign culture and of its individual members. The initial perception of a human behavior is often a decisive factor for the subsequent interaction with them – these being largely bound up in cultural norms. Thus, culture determines the individual interpretation of a particular fact, event, or representative's understanding of a foreign culture or individual from one. At the same time, the basis for the interpretation of facts and phenomena of foreign cultures may come from the well-known explanation taken from their own culture or the prevailing stereotypes about features a foreign culture.

In the final stage of research, which had been lasting for six months, the students noticed traditions and cultural tendencies of other nations more clearly following the cultural immersion regimen. The students from Oman, for example, became interested in the study of Russian history and culture. Most of the students noted the need to understand cross-cultural differences, as well as the need to build relationships with other cultures. Students were satisfied with the study technique of "cultural immersion," and they actively participated in the creation of a "piggy bank" of "cultural immersion" scenarios. Our experience has shown that this technology is engaging; students use it with pleasure. A preliminary analysis of the results of the research work at Herzen State University indicates positive dynamics of developing skills of intercultural interaction. The technology based on the cultural immersion can be widely applied within higher education.

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