

Building Intercultural Sensitivity, Stage by Stage

by Winston Sieck - October 15, 2019

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Intercultural sensitivity means a person responds well to cultural difference. Six stages show how it develops and guide custom activities for growth.

Teaching intercultural sensitivity can often feel challenging. You approach it with knowledge and compassion. Yet, some learners seem much further along than others in their journey to connect with culturally different people.

How can you help each of them to take the next step?

Fortunately, there is a way to clearly identify where your learners are coming from in terms of their awareness of other cultures. So, you can better create more personalized instruction that will further true learning and growth.

An article by Milton Bennett, published in *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, offers a developmental model for understanding the varying levels of personal awareness and cultural readiness. So, you can better teach all learners on how to increase their intercultural sensitivity.

The [paper](#), entitled, “A Developmental Approach to Training for Intercultural Sensitivity,” provides clear descriptions of the common stages that people go through on when learning about diverse cultures. The stages comprise the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS).

The piece argues that people move along a spectrum from “ethnocentrism,” to “ethnorelativism.” Teachers and trainers can offer supportive techniques to help advance learners through these stages. And, achieve greater understanding of cultures other than their own.

What Are the Six Stages in the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity?

As laid out in Bennett’s paper, you can look at the spectrum of development of intercultural sensitivity as having six distinct stages. These stages all relate to how a learner experiences *difference*. By looking for the cues described below, you can use these stages to determine where your learners are in their development of intercultural sensitivity.

Naturally, the concept of difference is highly subjective. The six stages illustrate how learners can move through greater awareness of their own personal ideas about difference.

This may eventually lead them to embrace an attitude that goes beyond acceptance. According to Bennett, they would ultimately integrate the differences of others into their own worldview. The six stages are as follows:

Denial

Bennett describes denial as the most ethnocentric stage. It can often be the result of someone's lack of experience with different cultures. For example, this might occur in small towns where most people share the same cultural background.

People in this stage may sometimes be able to distinguish very broad areas of difference. Yet, they can't see real intercultural nuance. For example, they might not be aware of the cultural diversity among people from Asian backgrounds.

Bennett also makes clear that the most extreme form of denial comes from a belief that different cultures may actually be less human than one's own.

Defense

In this stage, the learner accepts that differences between cultures do exist. However, they tend to find that those differences appear threatening. In need of defense.

This stage is where "negative stereotyping" against different cultures is employed. It is a way of preserving the individual's sense of their own culture as dominant and central.

Two additional cues may help you identify if learners are in this stage. First, look for a demonstrated perception of cultural superiority.

Also keep an eye out for the opposite. For example, Bennett describes a perhaps overzealous Peace Corps volunteer who exalts the host culture while "denigrating one's own culture."

Minimization

Bennett describes the minimization stage as the "last ditch effort to preserve the centrality of one's own worldview." He notes that this stage does acknowledge, and even tolerate some cultural difference.

However, it focuses on a "universalism" that minimizes difference. This can be expressed in a variety of ways.

A spiritual example might be, "We are all God's children." A political expression might be that of "universal rules or principles" that govern all societies.

Acceptance

You can think of this stage in the developmental model as a key benchmark in the process of learning intercultural sensitivity.

There are two facets of acceptance. First, there is acceptance of behavioral differences among cultures. The second is the acceptance of underlying differences in cultural values and world views.

Learners who reach this stage will [accept these differences without judgment](#). That is, they don't evaluate whether these differences are better or worse as compared with other cultures.

Instead, they show empathy towards those from different backgrounds.

Adaptation

Helping your learners reach the adaptation stage can make for tangible changes in their ability to be sensitive to different cultures.

People at this stage can go beyond recognizing and accepting cultural differences. They are also able to [adapt their own behavior and thinking](#), as appropriate, to take those differences into account.

For some cultural trainers, this is the practical top stage in the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity. However, the formal DMIS takes it one step further.

Integration

People who reach this stage fully integrate cultural differences into their sense of self.

They embrace difference as part of the way they move through the world. They do not deny or judge difference. Instead, they incorporate it into their world view.

Bennet writes that those who reach this final stage of their development of intercultural sensitivity “experience difference as an essential and joyful aspect of all life.”

Developmental Training Strategies for Growing Intercultural Sensitivity

You may already have a decent program in place for [cross-cultural training](#). The DMIS can help tailor it to your learner audience. The above stages provide a guide for understanding your learners' baseline knowledge about intercultural sensitivity. They help you get a sense of the level of your learners. Then, you can pick among the following teaching strategies accordingly to assist them in their learning:

Cultural awareness activities

These are simple activities like “Mexico Day” or screenings of films featuring people of other cultures. This approach is best if your learners fall into the first stage of development.

The goal here should simply be to illuminate cultural differences. You want to monitor and guide any resulting discussion, so you don't inadvertently give too much airtime to negative stereotypes.

Focus on what's “good” about one's culture

In this kind of activity, encourage learners to discuss and identify what is good about their home culture. The idea is to disarm learners who are stuck in the defense stage. If learners are instead speaking

negatively of their home culture, Bennett suggests that you try to spread those notions to other cultures.

For example, you might note that while American tourists may appear rude, people from other cultures may display insensitivity as well. Again, this stage requires careful monitoring of discussion.

Utilize resource persons

Bennett notes that the movement to the acceptance stage is a major shift. He recommends one effective strategy to getting students past the minimization stage is to incorporate a resource person.

This is a cultural insider who can represent their culture and speak with authenticity about the cultural differences they perceive.

Since Bennett published this article, it's important to note that much has been written about not expecting individual learners to represent their race or culture in a diverse group, such as a classroom setting.

However, due to the rise in availability of videos, TV shows, and films featuring diverse cultures, you can use people and media from outside of your learning group to provide this authentic perspective. In a more professional setting, you can find time to speak one-on-one with a cultural mentor.

Offer opportunities to practice identifying value and behavioral differences in communication

This kind of exercise includes frank discussion and application of examples of cultural differences in verbal greetings, body language, and other customs for communication.

Participating will help students who have arrived at the acceptance stage prepare to move into the next stage, where they apply what they've learned about how differences affect interactions.

Provide real life practice opportunities for interaction and empathy

Use real life scenarios to help learners enter the adaptation stage of intercultural sensitivity. Some common and useful options may be interactions between study abroad students and host families, or coworkers in a multicultural workplace. You can tailor your examples to the group that you are instructing.

Assist learners with creating, and reflecting upon, a personal ethical framework

The key challenge for learners in the integration stage is how to rely upon a system of ethics that are not grounded in one universal culture.

Learners at this stage acknowledge difference and deeply understand the ways in which cultural values affect behavior and interaction. Hence, they know that they cannot expect all people to refer to a single framework for how to behave.

Bennett suggests that learners at this level be encouraged to research tools that will help them develop an ethical framework that will help guide their interactions. And, integrate their newfound intercultural

sensitivity at the heart of that value system.

Helping learners develop their own integrative approach to intercultural interactions can be profoundly rewarding. Bennett's DMIS can let you do so with care, compassion, and a solid structure to ensure a safe, supportive learning environment.

Image Credit: [sasint](#)

References

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Retrieved: 10-16-2019

Updated: 10-15-2019

Published: 10-15-2019

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