

Looking in the Rearview Mirror: Ethnocentric to Citizen of the World

Actually, as I look in the rearview mirror, my first thought is just amazement that I have made it this far because for most of this journey, I have not had any real direction in which way to go. It really has been a bit like getting into a car, starting it, and then just beginning to drive without a map or any idea of where I was headed. Perhaps this lends support to the research I have read about the development of intercultural sensitivity. There is a natural process and progression to the development that a person will follow, even when they have no one to guide them. However, I have to hope that there is a more sure and deliberate manner to reach intercultural sensitivity and competence, and that there are maps, signposts, and road markers that we can use in our own lives to increase our intercultural competence, and that we can use to help our students also reach intercultural competency. This is the goal of my sharing with you today. In fact, as I look in my rearview mirror, I can see some of the people and events that did serve as signposts and maps for my journey, although I was not clear at the time of the significance that they held for me. I will also share some of those with you.

There have been many models proposed by various professionals in the field of intercultural competency and communication. The model that has been most helpful to me up to this point is the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity developed by Bennett, Bennett, and Allen. This model describes the five stages that people move through in their acquisition of intercultural competency. The model explains how learners overcome ethnocentrism regarding their own culture, and how they achieve sensitivity to other cultures. The model has six stages, which I will describe shortly, and illustrate through examples from my own life.

Before doing that, perhaps it would be good to define some of the terminology that I have been using so that we can all be sure that we are in the same vehicle and on the same route. The first term that we need to understand is *ethnocentrism*. Ethnocentrism is the default state that we are all born into and unconsciously experience. We see our own world and our own culture as reality. Our own culture becomes the standard that all other cultures are measured and judged by. If our own culture is what is real and true, then all other cultures and their differences are seen as a threat to be overcome. The characters for China in Chinese can be translated into

English as “middle nation.” Traditionally, the Chinese felt that their nation was at the center of the world, and all else revolved around it. Some have criticized the Chinese culture because of this, yet it is the state that all of us are born into and remain in until something moves us out.

One of the clearest signs of ethnocentrism that I have encountered recently is a textbook that I read and studied written to promote better intercultural communication. It’s an excellent textbook, yet, one of the premises of the authors for the need of better intercultural communication was that we as Americans are at a disadvantage politically and financially if we are not good intercultural communicators. We will lose some of our benefits and advantages if we do not communicate well with other cultures. The attitude that every political and business opportunity must benefit and advance the United States is an ethnocentric view.

I also need to explain what I mean by intercultural competency. Bennett, Bennett, and Allen define intercultural competency as “the ability to recognize oneself operating in a cultural context, the identification and appreciation of cultural differences, and the development of general strategies for adapting to culture difference.” For me as a teacher, it is a way for me to assess the readiness of my students to accept and learn from various kinds of intercultural activities and information that I may share in my classroom. Understanding their level or stage of Intercultural Competency will also influence the kinds of learning activities that I will choose for my classroom so that I may help my students move forward in the developmental process.

So, let’s begin looking at these stages. The first stage as been termed by Bennett, Bennett, and Allen as Denial. This is the stage that all of us are born into. We perceive the world to be exactly as our own experience of it is. At this stage we are generally unaware that we even have a culture. This is particularly true if one is a member of the majority group within a nation or region. There is little or no perception that there are other cultures that are different from oneself. It is possible for someone to stay at this stage all of their lives.

My personal journey began in the northernmost tip of New York state. This is a rather isolated region, confined on the south by the Adirondack Mountains and on the north and west by the U.S. border with Canada. Immigration, therefore, came from New England on the east, and the culture of that region still remains more similar to New

England than the rest of the state. My parents were white and middle-class, a condition shared with everyone else in the county.

However, even at an early age, there was one road-marker that helped me to begin to see that not every one was the same. My mother was actually from East Tennessee and each year we made a trip to visit her family. During those trips I began to learn that there were different cultures other than what I was experiencing in northern New York. As I grew older, I began to realize that my mother had grown up in a culture different than what she now lived in. She had eaten different foods, and even spoken English differently than she did now. During these trips I also had the chance to observe different races of people on the airplanes and buses. However, I did not have any personal contact with them and they still pretty much remained an 'other' and I did not see them as having anything to do with me. I still perceived that the rest of the world was pretty much like what I knew it to be. The differences in culture that I had experienced seemed to all relate to food and accent. I did not know that there were deeper cultural levels underneath all of that. Yet, it was my first hint that maybe not everyone was exactly alike. I do remember my mother trying to explain to me why there was a bathroom in the bus station for white people, and a bathroom for black people. And of course, my aunt and uncle ate biscuits at every meal, and cornbread, but we had white bread. And they seemed to want to put all kinds of things on their hamburgers and hot dogs that we did not. They also seemed to like saying 'ya'll' and they said that I talked fast, although from my perspective it was they who spoke slowly and had an accent, not me.

From the Denial stage, one moves into a stage called Defense. At this stage, one now begins to see cultural differences and strong negative stereotypes begin to form. One still sees one's own culture as the only true reality and the existence and differences of other cultures are a threat. To counter this threat, the world is often organized into 'us' and 'them'-associated with the denigration of 'them' and the superiority of 'us.'

I did not feel so threatened by my loving aunts and uncles, but there was one group of people that I learned to see as 'them'. There is a vast cultural difference between northern and upstate New York State, and the New York City area. There is constant intercultural conflict within the state between these two geographical groups. I

now know that both geographical groups consists of a wide variety of cultures, but at the time I only knew that my family, friends, neighbors, and I were 'us', and those from the City were 'them.' None of us believed that anything good could come out of New York City or Long Island. My first real confrontation with this stereotype and prejudice came during orientation for my freshman year at university. I learned that I was assigned to share a room with two other girls from upstate New York, and one girl from Long Island. I remember saying, "Well, they can force me to share a room with her, but I do not have to like her, and I don't intend to." This is a prime example of someone in the Defense stage. Yet, as it turned out, this one girl eventually became my best friend and the only university friend that I maintain contact with today.

Through some well-planned orientation exercises, I was able to get to know this girl, and we discovered we had much in common. At this point, I had moved into the Minimization stage. In the Minimization stage, one believes that everyone is really just alike. However, that similarity is based on the premise that everyone good is just like *me* and that is what makes this stage still part of ethnocentrism. The people in this stage hold strongly to the belief of the American Melting Pot, not realizing that in spite of the many colors and cultures going into that pot, what 'comes out' is primarily Caucasian and middle-class. What attracted me to my university friend was our commonalities, not our differences, and I remained in this stage for the next ten years of my life. I was very aware now that there were different cultures, but I still measured each culture and each member against my own. What was good and real was like *me*. No other country could possibly be as good as my own. Mothers from other cultures couldn't possibly love as well as an American mother. People who lived in other countries couldn't possibly be as happy as we Americans were. To me, it made perfect sense that everyone wanted to be exactly as I was.

After I graduated from university, I went to Taiwan to teach for 2 years. Although this experience did move me along in my developmental journey towards intercultural competence, it still did a lot to reaffirm to me that my culture was still the best. During those days in Taiwan, the U.S. was still held in high regard because we militarily were protecting Taiwan, and millions of dollars were given to Taiwan each year to help and prosper their economy. This helped to reinforce to me the greatness of my own nation and culture. I had an American passport, which it seemed that all of the Taiwanese longed for. I even had one Taiwanese student suggest to me that Taiwan should

become one of our united states. That seemed crazy to me, yet reinforced my ethnocentrism. Even my white skin was seen as something to be coveted.

Yet, there is no doubt that my two years in Taiwan moved me along to the next stage of intercultural competence, although just barely. That stage is called Acceptance by Bennett, Bennett, and Allen. Persons in the Acceptance stage have discovered their own cultural context and can accept the existence of different cultural contexts. They are able to identify how cultural differences in general operate in a wide range of human interactions. They can accept that there is cultural difference, but they are still looking at the world primarily through the eyes of their native culture.

This stage called Acceptance is the first point at which one can be said to have moved away from ethnocentrism. One has now entered a state called ethnorelativism. At this point, persons consciously recognize that all behavior exists in cultural context, including their own. They seek out cultural difference as a way of enriching their own experience of reality and as a means to understand others.

During my two years in Taiwan, I first became aware that I also had a race and a culture. My ideas were not well formed yet, but I began to know that I had a culture and race, just as did everyone else. Now, I was not so threatened by these differences, and at times even sought out difference experiences and could enjoy them. I learned to like Chinese food, and I learned to participate in various Chinese customs, such as giving and receiving gifts with two hands.

I returned to the States after two years and remained pretty much in the same stage of development. I moved around a bit because of study and work, and I became more aware of the cultural differences even here within the U.S., but it was not until I returned to Taiwan in 1984 and began to learn Chinese that I began to journey into the next stage of my life. As I wanted to experience Taiwanese culture and enjoy it, I tried to make friends with the Chinese people, and I did so. I began to form many close friends, and we remain friends even today, 25 years later. These friends helped me move into the next stage of intercultural competence: Adaptation. I was now able to look at the world through different eyes, and intentionally change my behavior in order to communicate more effectively in another culture. I became able to interpret and evaluate situations from more than one cultural perspective. I was able to critically evaluate my own culture and see the strengths, and now also see the weaknesses. I

could also accept that there were some things in the Chinese & Taiwanese cultures that I admired and agreed with. I began to form a personal identity that included aspects of both my native culture, and the culture in which I now lived.

It was not always a smooth journey. Much of the change in my own attitude and perspectives came because some people, mostly Chinese who I counted as friends, dared to confront some of my beliefs. They shared historical facts that had not been included in the history books that I had read. They asked me some very difficult “why” questions concerning some of my beliefs and values. To some of the questions, I had answers, but to some others of the questions I did not. Searching for those answers led me to realize that my culture did not always have all of the best answers.

It was this point that I moved into the final stage of intercultural competence development: Integration. At this stage, one begins to see one’s self as moving around in cultures, no longer completely at the center of any one or combination of cultures. The process of shifting cultural perspectives has become a normal part of self.

I moved from Taiwan to Hong Kong in 1997, and then into Guangzhou, China later that year. I remained in Guangzhou for two years, and then returned to Hong Kong for one year. During this time, I experienced two more Chinese cultures, but cultures that are very much different from each other, and from Taiwan. Finally, in 2000, I returned to the U.S. and settled in Kansas. Living in Kansas has added another whole cultural perspective to my own personal identity. I probably should say “perspectives”, because I have lived in Garden City, Kansas; Kansas City, Kansas; and Manhattan, Kansas. All three cities are very different culturally. I can truly say that I have learned to shift cultural perspectives and it is a normal part of my life. Bennett, Bennett, and Allen say that people in the Integration stage are very complex in their definitions of self, and that if you ask them, “Who are you?” you are likely to elicit a very long story. That is true of me. Honestly, I hate to be asked the question, “Where are you from?” because I know that the expected answer is a one-word answer, and I just cannot answer in one word.

However, Bennett, Bennett, and Allen also say that persons who have reached the Integration stage can feel profoundly alienated, particularly if they have not been intentionally developing their intercultural sensitivity. This was the situation that I found myself in up until a year ago. All of the development that had taken place had been

because of people and experiences that I had seemingly accidentally, or at the very least naturally, encountered along the journey. None of it was intentional. I found myself feeling very alienated from those around me. To my colleagues I am more Chinese than American, and not a native Kansan. To my Chinese friends, I am still more American than Chinese. To my family and friends in northern New York, well, they are not sure what I am, but I am certainly not like them any more. They would probably say that I have become rather weird. There were still a few friends that I felt connected to, but they were all Americans who had had similar experiences with me in China. For the most part, I felt like I had some disease that had no name.

It was not until I attended a workshop here at K-State a year ago, that I learned that I did not have a disease, and that there is a name for what I was experiencing. I am a third-culture adult. Since then I have learned that there are other names used to describe who am I: global nomad, global citizen, citizen of the world. I'm a woman, and I like to 'try things on.' As I had 'tried on' this new label over the last year, I have discovered that it fits me very well. I like it. There is not a lot of research or writings out there yet about who we are, but it is coming, and I believe that there will be more and more yet ahead.

One thing that I have also learned over the last year, is that third-culture adults most often find more in common with each other, regardless of the countries & cultures that they have experienced, than they do with persons who have experienced only one national or regional culture. This has given me the challenge to branch out from just connecting with those persons who have experienced only the combination of American and Chinese cultures. Over the last year, I have entered into more conversations with persons with Eastern European connections, Middle-Eastern connections, and other Asian experiences. I have found common ground, friendship, and fellowship with these persons as they, too, are citizens of the world.

Although the majority of my friends are still Chinese because of my Chinese language skills, I even look at them in a different light. I see them now as also being third-culture adults, only their experience is opposite from mine. They started in China and now are living in the U.S. I understand their experience better, and understand that we are now meeting in what might be called "somewhere in the middle of our cultures."

The difference is that it is no longer a “no man’s land” to me, rather it is the coveted ground that I believe we should all seek to attain.

Why should we all seek this level? We must because we are now living in a global world interconnected and interrelated politically, financially, and technologically. For example, one of my friends in China has had his salary cut 30% because of the financial decisions of people in the U.S. While national boundaries will remain, we are all now living in a global society and we must learn to communicate and live with each other. At the same time, we have become aware that our own nation is becoming increasingly diverse. In fact, it has always been diverse, only we did not recognize or respect that diversity. Now, as a nation, we are more cognizant of our diversity, but if we do not become intercultural competent, we will remain stuck in ethnocentrism.

Intercultural competence is not a choice, and I as an educator must deliberately choose and sequence learning activities that will contribute to my students’ development of intercultural competence. This means that I am not just giving them facts, such as “What is the capital of China?”, but I am consciously helping them to develop an intercultural mindset.

One curriculum design that I have found particularly helpful was developed by Nevitt Sandford. This curriculum design involves a careful balance of support and challenge for our students. We first, of course, need to assess where each of our students are in the intercultural competence development process. It is most likely that we will find a wide variety of stages and development represented in our classrooms, and differentiated instruction is going to be a must. That balance of instructional activities that we will need is expressed through the graphic being shown now on the screen. When we are introducing information, materials, or activities that are very challenging, we are going to need to use a process that is low in challenge. For example, most adults today find role-plays in front of the class quite challenging and not very comfortable. This type of activity would not be appropriate if you are trying to introduce cultural content that is highly challenging for them. An adult in the Defense or Minimization stage of development, is probably not going to react well to role-playing and discussing the differences in eating customs in the Middle East. On the other hand, this might be exactly the kind of challenge that someone in the Ethnorelativism stages would enjoy exploring. Another suggestion that Bennett, Bennett, and Allen make is that

when introducing and discussing intercultural topics, the only time that similarities between cultures should be emphasized is when your students are in the Defense stage. Students in the other stages of Ethnocentrism will see others as just like themselves, and this is what you want to avoid. Because persons in the Defense stage are feeling the threat of the differences, it is okay to offer a balance and to help them see some of the similarities. Offering only a diet of similarities and comparisons will be boring to those having already reached Ethnorelativism.

We also need to be aware that if we present highly challenging content in a highly challenging process, then our students may leave-either physically or emotionally. Oppositely, if we offer low challenge content along with a low challenge process, then they 'rest'. In other words, they do not learn anything. If we know the activity will be challenging to them, such as asking adult learners to role-play, then we will want to use less challenging content, or challenging content in very small amounts. If we want to challenge them with what we suspect will be stretching and maybe even threatening material, perhaps we will want to use discussion groups with peers they are comfortable with, or individual reflection journals. The important thing is to know our students and to know what will be challenging for them, both in content and in process.

In conclusion, although I am grateful that somehow I was able to successfully make the journey to intercultural competence unconsciously, I do not believe that it is a journey that we can leave to chance for each other, or for our students. As educators we must first begin with our own cultural self-awareness, and then deliberately guide our students to begin and move along in their own journeys. If we do not help them consciously learn about this process, then they will also be left feeling alienated and lost. As the numbers of international students continues to increase here at K-State, I am already seeing incidents of intercultural conflict. At the same time, the increasing numbers of international students gives us an opportunity like never before to help all of our students become proficient in intercultural competence. For the sake of our world, our nation, our university, and ourselves, we can do nothing less.

References:

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