

# The Learning Process Model for Intercultural Partnerships

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## 2.1 Learning across cultures

Specific behavioural or linguistic strategies are not generally exclusive to any one culture, though their frequency and strategic use may vary in a way that could be characterised as 'typical' of a particular culture. It may be possible that the variation of individual behaviour within a culture is at least as great as the variation between the 'average' behaviour of different cultures. Cultural categories commonly used in the literature on intercultural competencies (e.g. national, regional or ethnic divisions) are very broad approximations that cannot accurately reflect the complexity of individual identity and behaviour. Culture is not, then, fixed or imposed but it is constantly made and re-made in interaction: it is as much a product as a given (Hunfeld 1997; Ylänné 2008).

There is, therefore, a danger in concretising these 'average' characteristics. Participants in intercultural collaboration may operate with stereotypes of another culture which will predetermine their own behaviour and may impede their ability to learn from the encounter in an open and responsive way. Indeed, research by Francis (1991) suggests that certain modelling behaviour based on cultural stereotypes may be counter-productive in intercultural interaction. So, although the process of adaptation is an important one in intercultural interaction, it has both limits and inherent risks. A parallel exists in studies of partnerships between organisations with contrasting values and systems where participants' prior expectations lead to stereotyping or 'labelling' of counterparts. In a study of a partnership between a private company and a not-for-profit organisation (Laufer Green Isaac 2004) the authors found that each side was operating with a stereotype of the other that was not only inapplicable to the collaboration but could negatively influence behaviour towards the partner. Stott's study of an unsuccessful international partnership concluded that a failure to address such diversity, and the stereotypes each party held regarding the other, contributed to the project's failure

(Stott 2007). In a review of positive strategies for success in multinational teams, Gibson and Grubb (2005) propose that "Suspension of national stereotypic attributions promotes embracing cross-national divergence of ideas..." (Gibson and Grubb 2005: 85). The authors cite research showing that encouraging such suspension of stereotypes might allow perceptions of other cultural groups to be more accurate.

Reducing reliance on cultural 'characteristics' as a guide to intercultural behaviour needs to be balanced by a heightened attention to the process of interaction and a willingness to form impressions of collaborators based on individual behaviour rather than group generalisations (Hunfeld 1997; Ylännö 2008; Gibson and Grubb 2005; Spencer-Oatey and Franklin, forthcoming 2009). This is supported by the emphasis, in the literature on intercultural competence, on the development of self-knowledge, flexibility and an open, responsive attitude to interaction (Reid et al. 2009). These attributes are sometimes grouped together under the heading "awareness", both awareness of self and of others. Awareness is important in order to counter the inescapable tendency to view the world through a lens coloured by the assumption that our own culture has 'got it right' and that its norms, behaviours and values are globally applicable (Rehbein 2001). Each person needs to recognise that linguistic choices, expectations and interpretations are informed by culture (Meier, 2005). Consequently, a well-informed degree of awareness of one's own cultural influences as well as of one's own idiosyncratic tendencies is necessary for objective self-assessment (Barham 1991; Fantini 2000; Bennett 1993; Chen & Starosta 2005). A high degree of awareness of cultural differences and of the global diversity of norms and values is equally important for establishing a well-founded basis for intercultural interaction effectiveness (Fantini 2000).

Developing such awareness requires the adoption of a conscious practice of reflection on experience. The concept of reflection is at the heart of modern theories of learning (Argyris and Schon 1974; Schon 1983; Kolb 1984; Mezirow 1991; Wallace 1991; Greenwood 1998) and has become a core element in contemporary teaching and learning processes such as action learning (Revans 1998) and problem-based learning (Boud and Feletti 1997; Savin-Baden and Major 2004). Ratiu (1983) explicitly links these qualities in his research to the learning capacity of young executives, concluding that managers who demonstrated a more flexible style of learning would be more able to modify their cultural stereotypes in the light of experience and thus be potentially more interculturally effective.

Reflection, either individually or in group discussion, may focus on a case, a practical problem or an incident: valuable learning may be produced from a consideration of 'failures' or mistakes as usefully as from obvious successes (Hunfeld 1997). Belz and Muller-Hartmann (2003) employ the term "rich points" (coined by the linguistic

anthropologist Agar) to describe “instances of communicative behaviour” where participants from one culture do not understand, or misunderstand, the members of another culture. By consciously reflecting on their own performance in a collaborative project, Belz and Muller-Hartmann identified “rich points” in their own interaction from which they were able to learn. The analysis of these “rich points” highlighted the value of learning from experience as opposed to relying on established, apparently ‘factual’ knowledge acquired prior to the collaboration (2003:87).

A similar practice is used in educational programmes and in inter-professional learning where learners are encouraged to select “critical incidents” – elements of practical experience where perceived success or failure can be analysed in order to extract useful learning (Wallace 1991; Barr 2002; Reid 2007). Similarly, Poell et al. (1997) describe the use of “learning projects” in which groups of employees co-operate to focus on a work-related problem in order to “develop their competencies and simultaneously improve their work.” (Poell et al. 1997: 68). Such projects assume both an awareness of the learning process and the conscious practice of reflection, both individually and, through open discussion, within the professional group. A related practice is described by Ayas and Keniuk (2004) in their account of evidence from two major industrial case studies. They demonstrate the potential for the employment of activities that supported the participants’ ability to review their collaboration and to use the insights they acquired in order to enhance their practice.

*Reflective practices that help develop learning capabilities in projects include the use of various organizational learning tools... These are all practices that empower project members to reflect on task and team related aspects of project work and help them understand how their behaviour impacts on others. The aim with such practices is to improve project performance and refine learning capabilities of individuals.*

(Ayas and Keniuk 2004: 273)

The development of awareness through reflective practice can move the learner beyond the level of understanding available through acquisition of pre-established, ‘external’ knowledge. It can enable the learner not only to re-think prior experience and taken for granted ‘facts’ but, potentially, to question and re-formulate more deeply-seated attitudes and behaviour. Mezirow (1990, 1991) refers to this process as “transformative learning”, achieved through a process of critical reflection:

*Reflection enables us to correct distortions in our beliefs and errors in our problem solving. Critical reflection involves a critique of the presuppositions on which our beliefs have been built.*

(Mezirow 1990:1)

Similar conclusions are drawn by Easterby-Smith and Malina (1999) in their field study of a Sino-UK research collaboration. The authors particularly emphasise the place of what they term "reflexivity" in the collaborative process. They use the term consciously to denote not simply reflection on experience but an orientation to action based on that reflection:

*Reflexivity is more than merely reflecting on what has taken place: it involves actively considering the implications of what has been observed for the observer's own practice.*

(Easterby-Smith and Malina 1999:77)

Adopting an analytical model of collaborative research based on a project life cycle model, the authors both endorse previous studies of collaborative research and identify reflexivity as a process crucial to building intercultural effectiveness. They highlight the use of dialogue between the UK and Chinese teams and the willingness of the teams to share their expectations and perceptions, resulting in a higher level of self-awareness, fewer misconceptions through reliance on cultural stereotypes and greater insights both into self and to others. However, Easterby-Smith and Malina acknowledge that much of this dialogue was retrospective and that more progress could have been achieved during the project had a process of reflexive dialogue been consciously adopted at an earlier stage. This conclusion supports the argument presented later in this paper that effectiveness can be enhanced through a conscious process of individual and group reflection and of seeking to embed experiential learning into the practices of the team and, indeed, the wider organisation.