

# The Learning Process Model for Intercultural Partnerships



GlobalPeople

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# 1. Introduction

This paper addresses the issue of how learning can support intercultural effectiveness and is one of the outputs of the eChina-UK Programme. In this paper I synthesise theory and evidence from a number of fields in order to propose a practical model of learning that can be applied to intercultural collaborations. The aim is not to replace existing theories and models of learning but to draw on them in order to present a simple description that might be of value to those planning and managing international partnerships. Although much of what is said here relates specifically to *intercultural* collaboration I believe that many of the observations remain true of *cross-sectoral* partnership (which is, anyway, often intercultural as well) and of *inter-professional* learning too: indeed, there might be an argument for asserting principles of learning that contribute to effectiveness in working across boundaries in any long-term collaboration.

The paper is divided into an Introduction and four further sections. Section 2 reviews the various streams of literature which have informed the current study and presents an argument for the particular approach to learning promoted in this paper on the basis of established and complementary research in a number of different disciplines. Section 3 contains a description of the learning model for intercultural collaboration which has been developed as part of our current research at the University of Warwick. The practical application of this model, and the implications for policy in cultural collaboration, are discussed briefly in Section 4. The final section summarises the work and looks forward to further research and development around the issue of learning in intercultural collaboration.



## 2. Literature Review

The background literature to this work does not derive from a single disciplinary area or field of research. Indeed, the work previously carried out on intercultural behaviour has found outlets in a wide range of subject areas from business management to linguistics. Similarly, work on individual and organisational learning has been of interest and value to academics in many disciplines and this is reflected in the diverse sources on which the current work is based. As a result, this section is not a conventional review of a single, established body of academic knowledge, but rather the presentation of an argument which draws on previous theoretical and empirical work in order to provide a context – and a supporting framework – for intercultural research.

### 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 (Hunfeldt 1997; Ylännö 2008).

There is, therefore, a danger in concretising these ‘average’ characteristics. Participants in intercultural collaboration may operate with stereotypes of another culture which will pre-determine 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.

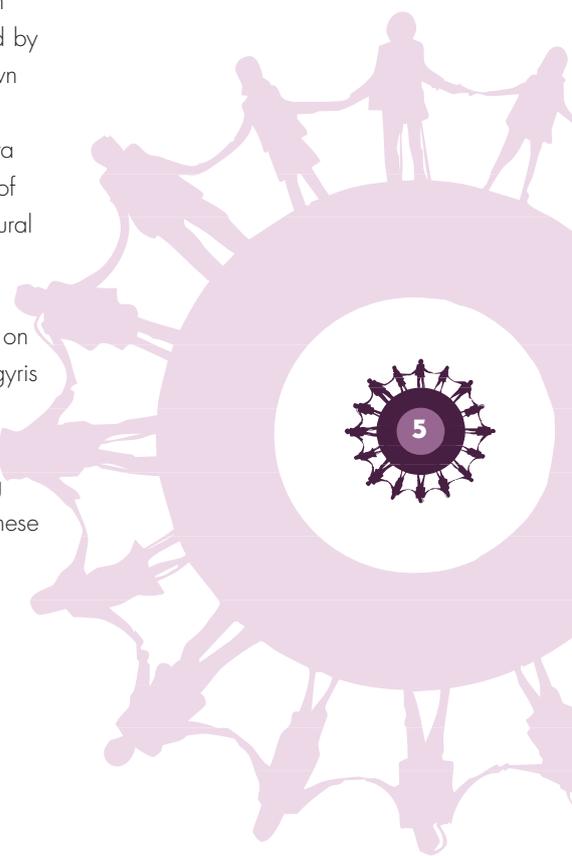


Reducing reliance on cultural 'characteristics' as a guide to intercultural behaviour needs to be balanced by a heightened attention to the process of interaction and a willingness to form impressions of collaborators based on individual behaviour rather than group generalisations (Hunfeld 1997; Yläne 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 (Revens 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.



## 2.2 Individual and Organisational Learning

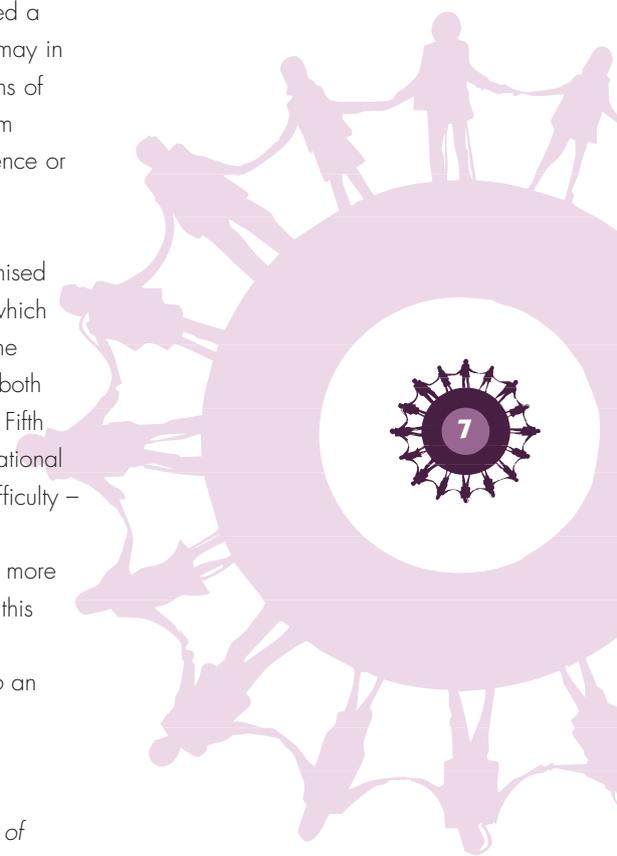
Much of the preceding discussion has focused on the individual's learning process, albeit one that is being shaped through interaction with others. Given that the primary practical application of the eChina-UK research is intercultural effectiveness in international projects, it is essential that we relate this process of individual learning to the process of learning that can take place in groups and, beyond the project team, within organisations as a whole. The transfer of learning from an individual to a group is relatively unproblematic inasmuch as the explicit sharing of ideas, experience and beliefs can be done in a planned and structured way as described in the work cited above on inter-professional and project-based learning. However, unless the members of the group have shared a common experience (and can thus share the process of reflection) group learning may in some respects be restricted to knowledge exchange. This is why the various streams of work-related learning emphasise the use of structured processes through which team members, partners or collaborators can learn together either from practical experience or from appropriate selected 'problems' or cases.

The centrality of social interaction to the process of learning has long been recognised (Reynolds et al. 2002) and theorists of learning have emphasised the degree to which learning is, inherently, a social activity (Lave and Wenger 1991). Nevertheless, the process by which individual or team learning becomes organisational learning is both more opaque and more controversial. The publication of Senge's evangelical *The Fifth Discipline* (Senge 1990) prompted extensive discussion of the concept of organisational learning and of the possibility of creating a 'learning organisation'. The central difficulty – both epistemologically and practically – is to establish the link between the acknowledged – and measurable – process of learning in an individual to the far more elusive notion of learning at the level of the organisation. Simon (1991) identifies this distinction precisely by highlighting the difference between individuals learning *in* organisations (an essentially social act) and individuals transferring that learning *to* an organisation.

*...an important component of organizational learning is internal learning – that is transmission of information from one organizational member or group of members to another. Individual learning in organizations is very much a social, not a solitary, phenomenon. However, we must be careful about reifying the organization and talking about it as “knowing” something or “learning” something. It is usually important to specify where in the organization particular knowledge is stored, or who has learned it...Since what has been learned is stored in individual heads (or in files or data banks), its transience or permanence depends on what people leave behind them when they depart...or move...Has what they have learned been transmitted to others or stored in ways that will permit it to be recovered when relevant?*

(Simon 1991: 125–126)

Agyris and Schon (1996) extend this line of thinking by proposing that organisational learning can be said to occur when the learning of individuals within an organisation is made explicit, shared, and embodied in the structures and routines of that organisation. This argument signals a productive way of understanding what it means to achieve



organisational learning and suggests that it might be measurable, in practice, through attention to an organisation's procedures and practices. It is reasonable to accept that, under such circumstances, action can be taken to create, foster and record the process of organisational learning. In the context of an intercultural collaboration, the creation of a "third culture" may mean creating a culture specific to that collaboration in which questioning, reflection and shared learning become part of the way that people work (Rodriguez 2005). Relationships across cultures are thus made and re-made in the process of reviewing experience and responding to that reflection<sup>1</sup>.

A number of attempts have been made to theorise this process by which learning transforms the context within which it takes place. Most famously the work of Argyris (1985) and Argyris and Schon (1974; 1996) has introduced and developed the distinction between single-loop and double-loop learning. In this formulation, single-loop learning represents a process by which a failure or discontinuity is met simply with a change of actions i.e. the agent tries to achieve the same means through different actions. Double-loop learning is distinguished by a response in which the agent does not simply search for alternative actions to achieve the same ends but also examines the appropriateness of those chosen ends. In Greenwood's words "Double-loop learning involves reflection on values and norms." (1998:1049).

Engestrom (2001) presents a similar argument for what he terms 'expansive learning'. Drawing on earlier work by Bateson (1972 cited in Engestrom 2001), Engestrom presents a case study of learning between a number of related communities (medical practitioners, patients' families, health centre staff) in which new models of practice are developed through a process of questioning and disruption of accepted practice, leading to deeper analysis, modelling of new practice, experimentation and reflection (see Engestrom 2001:137-155).

We can employ such theoretical models usefully in the understanding of the learning process presented in intercultural interaction. The development of individual self-awareness and the sharing of that awareness through group reflection and discussion will logically lead to a questioning of existing methods, assumptions and even underlying norms of behaviour. Such questioning and re-thinking, dispersed more widely through an organisation may lead to changes in institutional culture, manifested in changes of rules, procedures and accepted norms.

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<sup>1</sup> This is not, however, to accept uncritically the assumption made by some practitioners (Marquardt 1997) that the existence of organisational learning automatically implies a qualitative improvement in organisational performance. Empirical studies (Poell et al. 1997; Ayas and Keniuk 2004; Reid and Garnsey 1998) suggest that the relationship between individual learning, organisational learning and the creation of a "learning organisation" is a complex one demanding considerable attention and investment.



### 3. A conceptual model for learning in the intercultural project

Drawing on the literature summarised above, I propose a model for understanding and informing the learning process in an intercultural project. It describes and explains certain stages of learning through which the actor can pass while preparing for and engaging in intercultural collaboration but it does so in a way that those stages can be used to inform the planning and management of an intercultural collaboration. The stages are not intended to be strictly sequential: learning is a continuous process and it is likely that both the individual, and the group(s) of which they are a part, will visit and revisit sources of learning during the course of any new activity as they seek to make meaning out of experience (Kolb 1984; Mezirow 1990, 1991; Wallace 1991). As Chen (2008) puts it, when reviewing Wallace's work on teacher education: "teachers bring their previous experiential knowledge and received knowledge into practice and develop their professional competence by continuous reflecting upon and implementing new practice..." (p.57).

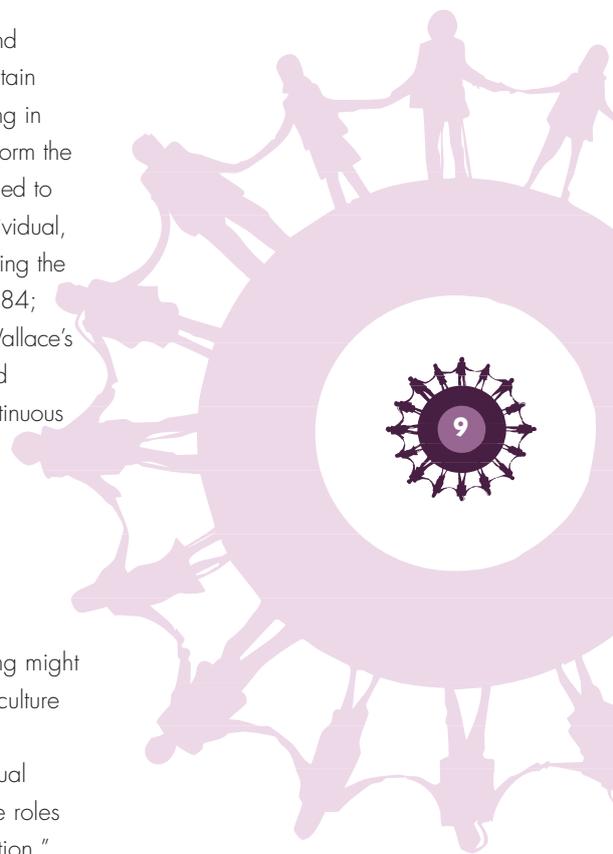
The three-part model is presented below, with brief additional explanation of each element, to show its purpose and its relation to the preceding argument.

**1. Acquisition.** Initial cultural learning may be restricted to limited *knowledge acquisition*: in Ryle's terms a process of "learning that" (Reynolds 2002). Learning might consist, for example, of acquiring contextual information about the less familiar culture with which a team is working. This would be the basic background information gathered pre-project. As Spencer-Oatey and Franklin put it "...important contextual information, such as the hierarchy of staff in an organisation and their respective roles needs to be sought actively, with conscious efforts made to gather such information." (forthcoming 2009). Such information helps participants to understand something about potential collaborators but is unlikely to alter their basic perception of their own cultural 'make-up' or how intercultural collaboration works. Insights will also be constrained by the quality and nature of the information available to the learner.

Bennett (1993) offers a six-stage model of "intercultural sensitivity" which acknowledges that acquiring information about another culture does not, in itself, guarantee greater intercultural sensitivity or effectiveness. Indeed, he argues that early experience of intercultural interaction may lead (in what he terms the "ethnocentric" phase) to defensiveness or a rejection of the significance of cultural diversity. It is only, Bennett suggests, through conscious self-development that the individual can progress into the "ethnorelative" phase and develop a more sophisticated understanding of culture<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Chen (2005) on the benefits and limitations of "culture mapping".



Thus, although acquiring knowledge about cultural traits and values is an important step in building effective intercultural performance, it is by no means sufficient to guarantee that. A process of self-examination and targeted learning is also required to develop the competencies that will make the individual more effective in a culturally diverse team. Chief among these is what we can term “awareness”.

**2. Awareness.** This consists of two main elements: developing self-awareness and reflection on experience. Success in intercultural collaboration will be significantly influenced by the participants’ ability to *develop self-awareness* both prior to and during the collaboration. This is highlighted in the literature on intercultural competence as a key competency for improving intercultural sensitivity and thus effectiveness (Reid et al. 2008; Hunfeld 1997). Self-awareness is supported by developing a habit of conscious *reflection on experience* and therefore active learning from experience, which is regarded as integral to the learning process. This may particularly be developed within the project context through individual or group reflection on moments of difficulty or discontinuity which provide “rich points” of potential learning about cultural differences (Belz and Muller 2003)<sup>3</sup>.

Using self-awareness to move beyond limited knowledge acquisition enables a more profound form of learning to take place. The participant uses both acquired knowledge and reflection on experience to question their own taken-for-granted beliefs and behaviours. The premises for their behaviour change as their assumptions are challenged and they are able to become more interculturally effective by refining their understanding and ability to respond to the behaviour of others. The development of self-awareness and active reflection on experience may prompt the learner to question and amend the assumptions on which their own behaviour is based.

**3. Embedding.** The first two modes of activity are situated at the level of individual learning, but we are also concerned with *group and organisational learning* – the way in which project teams and their host institutions might share this individual learning and become more effective in managing intercultural collaboration. The link between individual and organisational learning is through the explicit sharing of learning and through co-operative reflection that enables the *embedding* of learning into the procedures, systems and cultural norms of the larger organisation (Ayas and Keniuk 2004; Simon 1991; Argyris and Schon 1996).

Conscious and explicit learning during the project experience can be compared to “formative” (Laurillard 1993) or “iterative” evaluation (Rein and Reid 2005) that enables learning to be fed back into the performance of the organisation. This means that the project team can adjust its behaviour but also its procedures and systems. The changed behaviour of the project team can (with the right support) in turn impact the institution by recommending changes in systems, principles and priorities. Such changes will also, gradually, alter the culture of the institution so that it may become more effective in its dealing with diversity. A number of writers (e.g. Canney-Davison and Ward 1999; WorldWork n.d.) have also pointed to the importance of effective leadership in enabling both focused learning within the team and strategic sharing of learning with the wider organisation or network. High-quality leadership can facilitate both the management of crises within the team and the ability of the team to learn from its experience.

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<sup>3</sup> See also Canney Davison and Ward (1999) for their use of “strategic moments” in the intercultural project as a means of assessing the effectiveness of the team’s preparation and awareness.



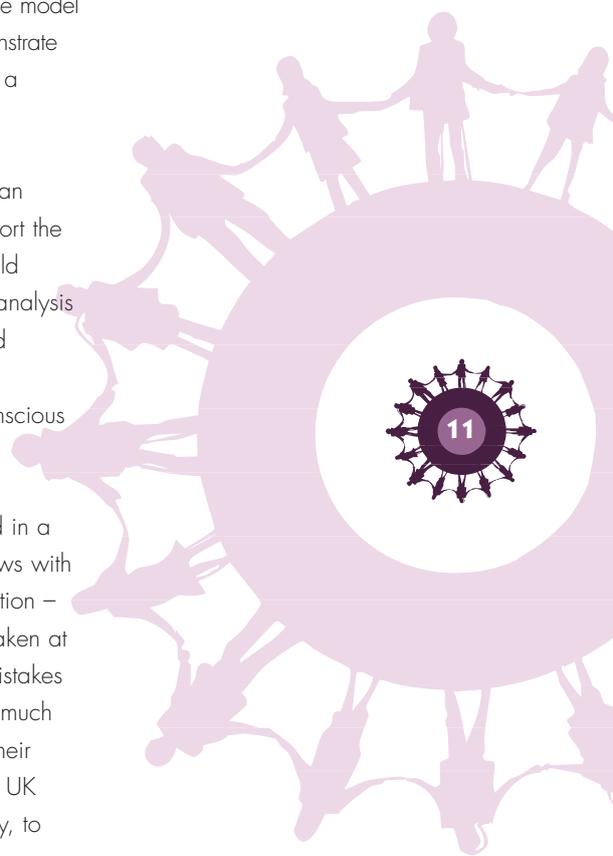
## 4. Application of the model

Within the work carried out in the eChina-UK Programme Phase 3, the Learning Process Model presented above has been utilised as a dynamic core to a more comprehensive model of intercultural effectiveness in the project life cycle. The process of learning is presented as a key factor that enables the achievement of enhanced levels of intercultural effectiveness through the recognition and development of cultural competencies. The author has also used the model to present data from the earlier phases of the eChina-UK Programme in order to demonstrate how the model is grounded in the reality of participants' experience and thus provides a usable framework for discussing that experience (Reid 2009b).

There are two potential applications of the model beyond the current research: as an heuristic device for organising data from similar projects; as a training tool to support the planning of projects and the development of their participants. The former use would permit other researchers to apply a fairly simple framework to the description and analysis of data from projects involving learning across cultures and sectors; the latter would provide practitioners with a means of anticipating (and thus facilitating) intercultural learning through the structuring of knowledge acquisition, reflective activity and conscious strategies for embedding knowledge organisationally.

A detailed example of a research (heuristic) application of the model can be found in a companion paper on the Global People website (Reid 2009b). Data from interviews with staff of three eChina-UK projects are presented within the framework of the Acquisition – Awareness – Embedding model. The aim is to illustrate not only what steps were taken at each of these stages to build intercultural learning but also where omissions and mistakes hindered achievement of that learning. Examination of the data demonstrates how much more effective project teams were when they took conscious decisions to support their intercultural learning. Examples of such action would include the recruitment to one UK team of a Chinese research student both to work on the project and, simultaneously, to carry out a study of interaction between the UK and Chinese teams: this individual became a key figure in helping the UK team members to reflect on their experience, understand it better through discussion with the researcher and thus to modify behaviour as the project progressed.

The use of the model in the planning and management of an international project is one of the objectives of the eChina-UK Programme and of the Global People Resource Bank<sup>4</sup>. An awareness of how the learning process works can contribute to the effective management of an intercultural collaboration. I would offer four practical recommendations<sup>5</sup>:



<sup>4</sup> The Learning Process section of the Global People website also contains a short introduction to the role of learning in the intercultural project and a guide to the three stage model and its practical use.

<sup>5</sup> These recommendations, and supporting material on the Learning Process as part of the Life Cycle Model can also be found in our publication *The Global People Toolkit: Managing the Life Cycle of Intercultural Partnerships*

**1. Planning for learning.** At an early stage of the project planning, the Project Director and/or Manager should take into consideration the learning opportunities afforded by the project, the possible learning needs of the participants and the activities that might be put in place to support intercultural learning during the project. Viewing the project as an intercultural learning experience is not just a practical approach, it is also a potential motivator for team members.

During the preparation stage, provision can be made for early knowledge acquisition, both through background research and through an initial sharing of experience and insights between the team members and their wider network. This, in turn, may help to influence team selection and pinpoint areas of knowledge and expertise that might be brought into the team. Planning the likely schedule and organisation of the project offers the opportunity to factor in time, opportunities and even frameworks for members to continue to share their learning.

**2. Building in reflection.** The most important single action to take is to build in time for reflection: consciously allocating time in the project for participants to think about what they are experiencing and, where appropriate, to share that with others will be a major contribution to project learning. Virtually every one of the intercultural competencies presented in the Project Life Cycle Model can potentially be improved through a process of conscious reflection on past performance.

Reflection can take place at the level of the individual, the team or the project partnership as a whole. For the individual, encouragement might be given to spend time reflecting on new intercultural interaction, perhaps to keep a diary or log to note these thoughts down. At the level of the team, regular meetings are essential and it should be clear to members that there is space at these meetings to raise questions and challenges arising from their intercultural experience. One of the eChina-UK teams agreed that they would have an informal discussion within the UK team after every major meeting with their Chinese counterparts. Often this would happen fairly informally – over a hotel dinner or on the plane home – but it would be there as a planned opportunity to compare thoughts and consider adjustment to future behaviour. At the level of the project partnership, effective shared reflection might take more time and resource to establish: it may be culturally uncomfortable for some participants; it will often require a degree of familiarity and even trust to have been established first. Nevertheless, as relationships strengthen in a partnership the value of allocating time to reflect together on the experience can be a positive contribution to the partnership's overall effectiveness.

**3. Sharing and embedding.** The intercultural competencies that underpin the Project Life Cycle Model include a number that emphasise values such as flexibility, sensitivity and responsiveness in communication and relationship-building. The development of such competencies go hand-in-hand with an approach to learning that seeks to share learning actively within the partnership and to embed the outcomes of that learning in the practice and procedures of the partners. Although most international projects encounter a shortage of time and resources at some point, both medium and long-term benefit can be gained by identifying ways of putting new learning into practice not just within a single team but within the partnership and the partnership's institutions. This might mean holding feedback events, publishing review or evaluation studies, finding



opportunities to speak to key committees or decision-makers. It might also mean using the learning from the current project to endorse further international collaborations to take place and enable them to be supported.

**4. Review, reflect, revise.** This simple mantra encapsulates the process: project leaders need to plan review into the project life cycle so that mistakes, problems and successes can all be recognised and acted on as promptly as possible and with the involvement of other team members. The process of reflection supports effective review and encourages involvement. The objective should always be to revise behaviour if required and, perhaps, also to revise assumptions and 'taken-for-granted' knowledge: active learning can be a process of testing assumptions against experience and developing more sophisticated attitudes and behaviour.



# 5. Summary

The frequency with which individuals and institutions must collaborate to confront complex issues in the contemporary world has put a premium on their ability to work effectively across boundaries of race, nation, economic sector and profession. Every interaction or collaboration of this kind is both an opportunity for learning and an opportunity to improve the experience by building that learning explicitly into the process of interaction. At the level of an intercultural project collaboration, the benefits of the learning process may be optimised by the conscious application of a learning model. The use of the model described here ( Acquisition – Awareness – Embedding ) encourages participants to prepare for collaboration through knowledge acquisition and the development of self awareness; to test knowledge and extend awareness through individual and group reflection on the experience of intercultural interaction; to share the learning from that reflection both within the active group and more widely into the institution with a view to transforming not just the individual's but the team's and the institution's ability to handle intercultural interaction effectively.



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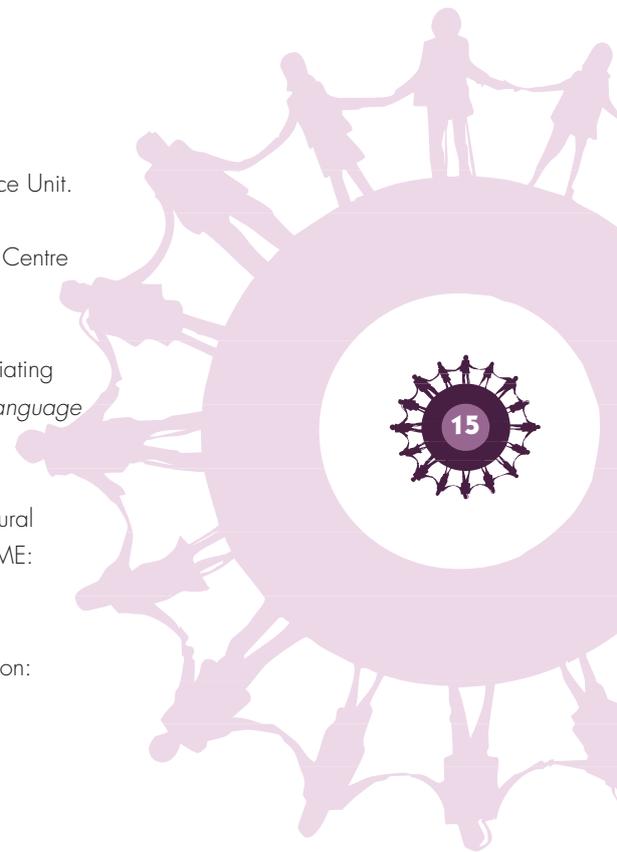
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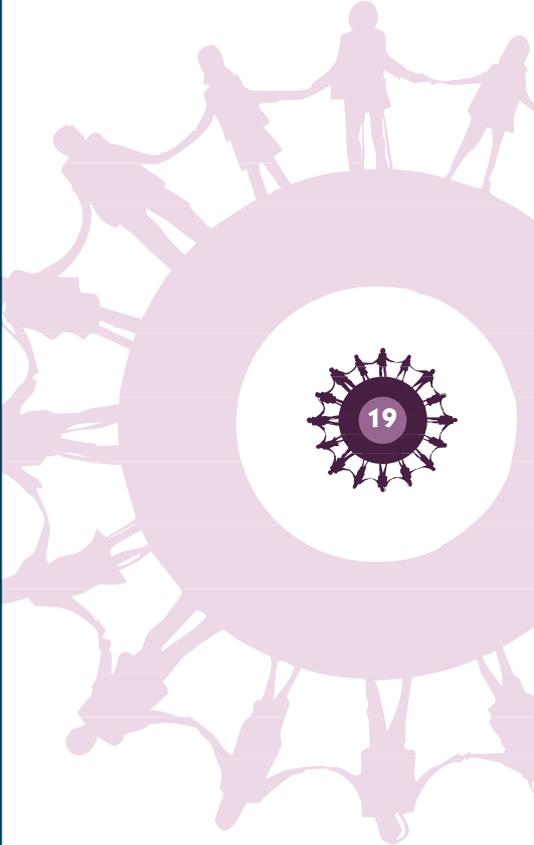
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**Notes:**

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