

Caprice Lantz-Deaton and Irina Golubeva: **Intercultural Competence for College and University Students**

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The number of students participating in higher education mobility has been on the rise in the past two decades resulting in a total of 5.6 million university students studying abroad by 2018 (OECD 2020). In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic seemed to have ended academic mobility, however, after the first shock of the crisis, it is clear that international mobility will remain an integral part of university life. In the frameworks of research on student mobility during the COVID-19 crisis, QS – one of the most reputable ranking companies – found that although 61% of tertiary students claimed that their mobility decision was affected by the pandemic, only 6% of them stated that they no longer wanted to study abroad (QS 2020).

Based on the above, it is clear that universities and colleges are still places where people from all walks of life meet on an everyday basis. Independent of the fact that encounters take place at campuses or in online learning environments, one thing definitely remains – where people meet, cultures will meet; and where cultures meet, we all need to make an effort to understand and be understood, to accept and be accepted and to be able to work together for a common future.

Being able to build relationships across cultures may sound easy at first sight, but if we take a closer look into the matter – and into ourselves of course – we will find that it requires something more: an ability to function and communicate effectively with people from different backgrounds; something called intercultural competence.

Intercultural competence – also known as global competence, henceforward referred to as IC – might strike as an easy concept at first glance; however, the vast amount of research and literature on the topic suggests otherwise. If someone is trying to grasp what it is about, one option might be to dive head-first into the plethora of books and articles published on the various concepts, models and guides; another one is to find a simple-to-use handbook that offers a general – but broad – overview, tackles all the important issues and provides practical examples and case studies – and this is what *Intercultural Competence for College and University Students - A Global Guide for Employability and Social Change* by Lantz-Deaton and Golubeva aims at.

According to the authors, both distinguished academics with decades of expertise in the field, the book primarily targets tertiary students with the objective of helping them to understand the concept of IC, and more importantly, to support their self-development in the field. Hence, the structure of the book is typical of those used in the classroom: each chapter centers around one issue, with detailed description in the content of tables, enabling the reader to find each topic easily.

The chapters are built on each other, beginning from the introduction to the concepts and models of IC through discussing how to become intercultural leaders. This means that if someone is absolutely new to the area, they can learn about IC from the very beginning, while those who are more familiar with the topic, can use the material in the chapter(s) according to their specific interest. The coursebook structure is also reinforced by the learning outcomes listed at the beginning of each chapter – this is not only useful for students, but can help a great deal for educators who would like to integrate the volume into their teaching.

In each chapter, the theoretical content is complemented with case studies and real life examples, highlighted in separate boxes. This is one of the strongest advantages of the coursebook as, besides the sound theoretical knowledge, the students can read examples that they can easily relate with, and reflect on similar situations in their own lives. Beyond the case studies, each chapter contains so-called ‘Thought boxes’, in which part, the students are required to stop, think about what they had read and create their own opinion about each topic. As the main objective of the book is to support the development of IC, these ‘thought boxes’ are not only extremely useful when reading the book for the first time. The readers are encouraged – and really should – revisit these parts repeatedly, to see how their own thinking about the issues in question changes over time. The references given at the end of each chapter provide a solid ground for further reading and research for students and teacher readers alike.

Following the same structure throughout the book, Chapter 1 (*What is Intercultural Competence and Why Do We Need It?*) provides an intriguing insight on why the concept of IC is much more complex than we would think at first sight. The authors make the reader stop and think again: is it really that evident what IC is; do we surely know how to use and develop it; and most importantly, is it really something that we have at a level we think we do?

The reader’s self-reflection (and self-questioning) is triggered by ‘hard’ examples of diversity, inequality and cultural conflicts, all stemming from the lack and/or misinterpretation of one’s IC. These thought-provoking questions on one’s own competences and development level connect the dots between IC, social diversity, inequalities, racism and global conflicts, and how our own development can contribute to creating a better world.

Following the introductory notes on how to use the book, and starting from the beginning, Chapter 2 (*What is Culture?*) aims to give an overall view of what culture is, as it is undoubtedly crucial that the target group has a clear picture on what we talk about when we talk about IC. Given in today’s social and political context, it is important to emphasize the importance of avoiding stereotyping whilst talking about culture. The authors provide a broader and deeper insight into the concept of culture, and it is good to see that not only national differences are mentioned, but personal and social aspects, and individual traits are all touched upon, as well.

The focus is mostly on Hofstede's dimensions (individualism-collectivism; uncertainty avoidance; power distance (strength of social hierarchy) and masculinity-femininity (task-orientation versus person-orientation), but based on this well-known classification, a broad and clear picture is given about the rather complex idea of culture itself. The 'thought boxes' are extremely useful in exploring one's own experiences and provide several opportunities to Aha! moments, and furthermore, these personal stories also support the reader in grasping the author's intentions. However, it is interesting that ICT and the impact of the online world on identity and culture is only mentioned in a couple of brief sentences. Given the fact that it affects our everyday life to a high extent, more emphasis on this aspect of culture might come handy.

After defining the main ideas behind IC and culture, Chapter 3 (*How do we react to cultural difference?*) primarily focuses on stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination. The 'thought boxes' – again – provide lots of opportunities of self-reflection to realize that these phenomena not only exist in our outside world, but in our own world, too. Furthermore, and most importantly, the authors break down the general stereotypes and prejudices about stereotypes and prejudices themselves, especially in connection with gender and minority-related issues, which form the face and bring about most of the IC-related challenges of our societies. They highlight the basic concepts of both negative and benevolent prejudices and give a historical and up-to date overview on these issues. The chapter also sheds light on the chain reaction-like relations between generalization, stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination, which is of key importance, because only if one understands these processes – and is willing to reflect on them in their own mindset –, can the negative effects of these phenomena be eliminated.

Chapter 4 (*How do we define intercultural competence?*), the key chapter of the book is mainly built on the questions, thoughts and self-reflections of the previous chapters. The main theories, definitions and assessment types of IC are described here, each of them completed with their respective criticisms and limitations. The models are described in detail for a clear understanding, and with the aim that the reader sees the complexity and boundaries of each model. Based on the knowledge gained from learning about the basic concepts of IC, the chapter turns to the main question of the whole book: if we have the basic knowledge on what culture and IC are, and how we can develop our own IC. It is extremely positive that, although the (formerly acknowledged) Western bias is also present in this chapter, the authors provide a quick overview of other (Far-Eastern and African) approaches, and that the reader is left with further readings to discover these for themselves. The possible development paths of IC mainly follow Bennet's development model, but the stages are described with 'thought boxes' and thus, the reader has the opportunity for self-reflection and evaluation throughout the chapter.

The limitations of creating a definite model and description of IC is not only stated but clearly justified, and it reflects the open-mindedness of the authors, who, instead of trying to give ‘the’ answer, open the door to the reader to find their own interpretation with appropriate guidance provided. The chapter also tackles some rather sensitive issues, like forced marriage or FGM, seen from the perspective of cultural differences, and advises on how to respond to these issues in a forward-looking way.

After providing a sound theoretical knowledge on the idea and the complexity of IC and its development, the further chapters of the book turn towards practical implications. Chapter 5 (*How Can We Develop IC While At College or University?*) provides a step-by-step guide for both students and faculty members on how to best exploit the cultural and international diversity generally present at campuses. Furthermore, the differences and relations between IC and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) are explained, so that the reader gets a clear picture about their interconnectedness, especially in the field of tertiary education.

Stepping beyond the borders of campuses, Chapter 6 (*What Are Critical Incidents and How Can We Get the Most Out of Them?*) focuses on the issue of critical incidents: the decisive moments that impact one’s IC in a life-changing way and their key importance, if we want to understand how one’s IC is developing. Naturally, the authors provide a lot of cases as examples, enough for anyone to identify with at least a couple of them. Furthermore, and most importantly, the readers are taught how to elaborate a detailed action plan on putting these incidents in good use during the process of IC development.

As promised by the subtitle of the volume (*A Global Guide for Employability and Social Change*), the final chapters guide the readers through the practical use of IC in relation with employment and leadership. Chapter 7 (*What Are the Links Between IC and Career Development?*) provides hands-on advice on career planning and clarifies the importance of IC during job search, again highlighting the close relationship between IC and EDI, and their connections to the job market. The authors provide several examples based on the daily practices of IC awareness and EDI put into practice at workplaces. As for career development, after a general international overview on the prevailing legal provisions related to cultural diversity and EDI, the book almost exclusively focuses on the viewpoint of the candidates. Whilst in the other chapters, all stakeholders (i.e. university students, educators and academic staff) are taken into account and broader perspectives are reflected, in relation with employment, we only get practical advice and tips as job seekers. The examples are interesting, but almost exclusively focus on how to adapt to the expectations of the employers while the emphasis is put on the adaptation techniques and how to meet these, lacking the viewpoint of employers and the challenges faced by human resources specialists.

The last chapter (Chapter 8: *How Can We All Be Intercultural Leaders?*) concentrates on the need for change in society, and how everyone with awareness of their own IC can contribute to the effort. A theoretical overview is given on the main ideas and theories of leadership and how leadership is a much wider concept than leading a group of people. The authors not only contemplate on the traits of good leadership, but also emphasize the importance of leading by example, a crucially important aspect in intercultural leadership. As a result, the most common myths about leadership are busted: the chapter sheds light on the fact that leadership is much more than being strong, powerful and positioned above the others. The two key concepts mentioned here are transformational leaders and ‘moral agents’, which are closely related to the transformational aspect of leadership. Of course, great emphasis is put on the importance of IC in leadership, and what characteristics are valued as an intercultural (transformational) leader, regardless of one’s job title. We can also learn about how IC and EDI are inseparable at the workplace, and learn the basic theories related to organizational cultural competence (OCC) and corporate social responsibility (CSR), and in addition, how one can contribute to their development at individual level with the greater good in mind.

The richness of the examples provided by the authors throughout the volume makes it easy for any reader to relate with the whole book; regardless of one’s own culture – and despite the admitted Western bias of the authors – anyone can find at least one example that they can feel as a matching one; and this is a key factor in getting closer to all the other examples throughout the chapters. The examples and case studies provided are obvious references of contemporary social issues, therefore, they might need to be updated in later reprints to always reflect the current social issues respectively. The examples of diversity, inequality, minorities, etc. are all written with a Western bias, clearly admitted by the authors at the very beginning of the volume. Although educators are more likely to be able to adapt these examples to their own contexts, this might pose a challenge for students out of Western culture (e.g. in Central and/or Eastern Europe), where these kinds of coursebooks are in great need. However, as a direct consequence of the questioning, self-reflecting and thought-provoking character of the whole book, in the end, the authors provide the reader with no final and definite conclusion. This open ending faithfully reflects that, just as one’s IC can never be fully developed, there will always be room for improvement. However, reading this book, completing the exercises, thinking through the questions and, most importantly, revisiting our thoughts from time to time in order to see our own development is definitely a good start on one of the most important journeys of self-awareness and towards a better understanding of ourselves and our place in a global world.

References

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