Cultural Intelligence: Developing students who *can* act local and think global

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*Introduction:*

Canadian post-secondary institutions are putting increasing emphasis on international experiences for their students. These experiences are seen as critical components for the educational mandates of institutions and generally considered a good thing for students. International experiences most commonly take the form of some type of study abroad and less commonly work abroad programs. The range of experience can be as little as a few days accompanying a professor to an international site for a study tour to as long as a semester or more abroad with a full academic term, work term, or some combination thereof. In 2006/07 approximately 18,000 Canadian post-secondary students, or 2.2% of this population participated in some form of international experience (Bond, 2009).

With such emphasis being put on developing and running international experience programs throughout the Canadian post-secondary landscape why are the participation rates so low? Could it be that there is a need for a different way of assessing meaningful outcomes from these experiences? Which outcomes matter to the student, the institution and ultimately society? Why should a student make the effort, pay the price and take the time to participate? Why should institutions, and their Provincial funders, continue to invest in these programs? How can programs be structured such that outcomes, and the return on this investment, can be maximized? What needs to be communicated to students, institutions and governments about the value of these experiences?

This paper examines one approach to assessing international experiences for meaningful outcomes that relate to employability and global citizenship. Increasing the potential for employability is an outcome that does matter to students. Student retention literature points to the importance of linking students program of study to their career goals and by doing so improving student retention and completion (Tinto, 1988). Global citizenship, as defined in a multitude of ways, is an outcome that often matters to educational institutions (Schattle, 2008). If programs can assess outcomes from an international experience and then connect that assessment to improved potential for employability and to global citizenship then this might be one solution to the problem of low participation rates.

This paper will examine the usefulness of the concept of cultural intelligence, defined as “an individual's capability to function and manage effectively in culturally diverse settings” (Earley & Ang, 2003), as a frame to assess outcomes that link to employability. If international experiences can be shown to result in the development of cultural intelligence and link the importance of cultural intelligence to employability, then post-secondary institutions will be contributing to the strengthening of our society as a whole. No matter what path a student chooses to take in their career upon graduation they will be living and working in a culturally diverse setting. They will need to act locally and think globally (Kefalas, 1998). Having opportunities to develop capabilities to “function and manage effectively in culturally diverse settings” would be of tremendous value for students and their employers in both the short and long run. Graduates with these capabilities, and the
Cultural Intelligence: Developing students who can act local and think global

ability to articulate them, could provide more value to employers, and be better able to be global citizens in their workplaces and elsewhere.

The current lens for evaluating international experiences: what is success?

In a recent study commissioned by the Canadian Bureau for International Education it was reported that nearly 18,000 Canadian students participated in study abroad experiences (defined to include both study and work experiences) in 2006/07, representing about 2.2% of the Canadian university student population (Bond, 2009). In this study it was reported that, based on findings from a survey done by the Association of University and Colleges in Canada in 2007, institutions responded that they participated in study abroad for the following reasons: to develop global citizens (44%), to strengthen international understanding (23%), to develop intercultural awareness (11%) and as a means to increase job skills and employability (5%) (Bond, 2009). In the same study it was reported that the most common reason students identified of a barrier to their participation in international experiences was a lack of funds (69%) followed by no perceived benefits (9%) (Bond, 2009).

Considering that the most significant reason for institutions to engage in international activity is to develop global citizens, it is interesting to note that the least significant reason is to increase job skills and employability. Perhaps this lack of institutional focus on the link between international experience and employability – and how employability is important for global citizenship – might be one of the explanations for such low participation rates. Along the same vein, if students are indicating that lack of funds is a significant barrier, then it might be a suitable strategy for institutions to help student articulate how international experiences that allow students to study and to work are an investment in greater earning potential in the future. More emphasis could be placed on the connection between international experience and employability – both during and after a student’s academic program.

While research has looked at how international experience results in development of cross-cultural skills such as knowledge of the host country, self-awareness and personal development (Bond, 2009), Kitsantas (2004) determined that students did gain cross-cultural skills and global understanding as a result of international experiences, and that the most significant factor predicting this development was goal setting for cross-cultural competence (Kitsantas, 2004). Despite these and numerous other studies looking at development of students, little has been done to consider the linkages between student developments as a result in international experiences, how those developments can be articulated and the connection to employment related skills and aptitudes.

In a 2008 study conducted by the Collegiate Employment Research Institute at Michigan State University, employers reported that a student’s previous international experiences were not valued and did not increase the students’ chance
Cultural Intelligence: Developing students who can act local and think global

of post-graduation employment. The researchers identified the inability of students to articulate to prospective employers what they had learned and the skills they had gained as a result of international experience was a significant contributor to this perception (Gardner, Gross, & Steglitz, 2008).

However in a study commissioned by the Canadian Bureau of International Education, a small group of employers was asked if students should have an international experience during their studies. Sixteen out of seventeen employers responded in the affirmative with “ninety-one percent identifying the importance of cultural and other benefits” (Bond, 2009). This report goes on to state that study abroad is no longer seen as a barrier to career advancement and that employers indicated that there was a need to “ensure that the study abroad experience has practical and tangible benefits on their employability and career aspirations” (Bond, 2009). Some suggestions made by employers were to facilitate employment abroad and establish international experience as a norm among employer expectations (Bond, 2009).

Given that there is growing recognition among Canadian employers about the value of international experiences and that students indicate financial need as a barrier, why is it that institutions offering these experiences rank job related skill development as their lowest priority? One reason for this seeming disconnect between international experiences and possible employment related outcomes is the dominance of the study abroad model that focuses on the classroom-based experiences and successes of the student. The study abroad model is the one that is most commonly found in Canada and as such might influence research findings.

Another model that exists is the work-based model where student engage in international co-operative education, internships and other forms of work-based learning. In the latter case there is a natural connection to the workplace and the needs of employers. As part of the international experience students are provided training and support to succeed in international workplaces. Again, while there is significant research in the area of training to be successful working internationally, little has been written about how to articulate the skills students gain in such circumstances to prospective employers in order to improve their employability. So while work-based programs might be well positioned to help inform the discussion regarding international experiences and employability, not much has been reported to date. However, it might be important to separate the two types of experiences: the classroom based and the workplace based, for the purposes of determining differences in the contributions made to the student’s development.

Examining the contribution that international experiences might make to a student’s employability is not only about success in getting a job. Fundamentally, if we want our students to act locally while thinking globally they will likely be doing that in some sort of workplace upon graduation. The will be enacting their “global citizenship” while an employee of an organization, whether that organization is a small business, a large multinational, the public service or a not-for-profit agency. A
powerful measure of the success of international experiences could be how these students are able to learn from their experiences, develop international competencies, embrace a “global mindset” defined as “a set of individual attributes that enable an individual to influence individuals, groups and organizations from diverse social/cultural/institutional systems” (Javidan, Steers, & Hitt, 2007) and bring that to bear in employment settings. Not only might these students be more mindful of how they could enact change in their workplaces throughout their careers, but they may also be more inclined to participate in international experiences.

*How can we make sense of international experiences?*

It is easier said than done to identify the learning that occurs during any type of experience, and perhaps even more complicated for international experiences. Overlaying the experience are elements of language, cultural values and norms, isolation and loneliness. However, there are parallels to what a student experiences when they engage in experiential education such as a co-operative education work term. Often students are moving from one culture to another as they transition from a familiar academic context to a workplace. Whereas they may still be speaking the same language, there may be very different terminology and understanding, values and norms may be quite new and often students do feel isolated and alone in a workplace. How can we use what we know about work-base learning to help us understand what is happening in an international context?

Of use might be combining the learning styles model of Kolb, used as the basis for most work based education programs, and the learning-how-to-learn model of Hughes-Weiner used in the field of intercultural communication and training (Kolb, 1976); (Hughes-Weiner, 1986). In the following figure 1 we can see how these two models of explaining how learning develops can be nicely aligned (Bhawuk, 2009).

Figure 1. Learning How to Learn Cycle and Disconfirmed Expectation (Bhawuk, 2009)
Cultural Intelligence: Developing students who can act local and think global

Figure 1 illustrates the experiential learning model of Kolb, consisting of the four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. These are combined with Hughes-Weiner’s concepts of disconfirmed expectation, emic (knowledge specific to that particular culture), and etic (universal knowledge) (Bhawuk, 2009). The way a student learns during these experiences is first by having the “concrete experience” (Kolb, 1976). During this experience the student is likely to have a “disconfirmed expectation” where something did not turn out as expected (Hughes-Weiner, 1986). Through reflective observation about this disconfirmed expectation the student gains some understanding about the situation and develops emic – or cultural specific knowledge- pertaining to that event. Through additional reflection the student moves to the stage of “abstract conceptualization” where they engage their meta-cognitive abilities and develop etic –or more universal understandings. This development requires the students to be self-reflective about their own biases and actions that contributed to the situation and draw broader conclusions that they can take to more settings than the specific one where they had the concrete experience. In the final stage, active experimentation, the student tries again in a new setting where their previous learning is demonstrated by how they respond to new disconfirmed expectations.

We know of the importance of setting up the right kind of concrete experience so that it is a truly educational opportunity (Dewey, 1938). We know about the importance of providing proper supports, or in Vygotsky’s term, scaffolding, for the
Cultural Intelligence: Developing students who can act local and think global

student to ensure reflection is happening appropriately (Vygotsky, 1986). However, it is often difficult to enable critical reflective processes that allow students to articulate their learning from an international experience for themselves and to others, such as prospective employers.

A framework that might support this learning process, and that recognizes the unique dimension of an international experience might be the concept of cultural intelligence (Earley & Ang, 2003). Cultural intelligence defined as “an individual’s capability to function and manage effectively in culturally diverse settings” could be a concept that would be of benefit to international experience programs as well as programs sending students into a variety of workplaces that are culturally diverse.

The idea of cultural intelligence is rooted in other intelligences, such as emotional and social intelligence, but recognizes that being in an intercultural setting requires additional dimensions of intelligence. Earley and Ang’s work identifies four factors that are critical to cultural intelligence: cognitive skills, metacognitive skills, a motivational dimension and a behavioural dimension (Earley & Ang, 2003). While measures of emotional intelligence (EQ) also has similar constructs of the cognitive, motivational and behavioural, studies have shown that just because someone has a high EQ does not mean that they will be able to interact effectively in an intercultural setting that requires “appropriate cultural knowledge, motivation and behaviour” and that this is best measured looking through a cultural intelligence lens (Kim, Kirkman, & Chen, 2008).

Cognitive ability is important, as a certain amount of knowledge, including language is required to function in an international setting. Having an understanding of how things work, traditions and customs, values and norms are necessary. The metacognitive skills required relate directly to the Kolb/Hughes-Wiener models of learning. Being able to reflect, be self-aware, develop both emic and etic understandings are critical to learning and understanding in an international setting.

The motivational dimension links to emotions and those going into international settings need to have the predisposition to change and the ability to express emotions appropriately as the conditions require (Bhawuk, 2009). Recognizing and finding ways to articulate this dimension is key to Mezirow’s notion of transformative learning, which takes the student beyond transmission and transactional learning into a place of owning the learning (Mezirow, 1991). The motivational piece is also central to the concept of self-efficacy, or a student’s belief in their ability to manage and to persist under difficult circumstances (Bandura, 1977). Self-efficacy provides the motivational fuel to keep going.

It is one thing to understand what is going on in an international setting on a cognitive and meta-cognitive level and to have the right kind of motivational forces, but it is another to be able to act on that understanding and motivation in ways that are culturally appropriate. This is where the behavioural dimension is so important as individuals who are living in another culture are learning new behaviours at the
same time (Bhawuk, 2009). The central tenet of social learning theory is that people anticipate actions and their consequences and decide how to behave accordingly based on these previous observations and experiences (Bandura, 1977). Without the ability to make these adaptations it would be very difficult to function appropriately in an international setting.

Using this four-factor framework of cognitive, meta-cognitive, motivational and behavioural dimensions of cultural intelligence, an instrument was developed, the 20 item Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS), see Appendix 1. Reliability and validity testing of the CQS has shown it to be a “clear, robust and meaningful four-factor structure” that is stable across samples, time, methods and countries. Cultural intelligence has been shown to have predictive validity over and above demographic characteristics, personality, general mental ability, emotional intelligence, cross-cultural adaptability, rhetorical sensitivity, cross-cultural experience, and social desirability (Van Dyne, Ang, & Koh, 2008).

The CQS can also be used for self-reporting, peer-reporting and supervisor-reporting, with self-rated scores having been shown to be positively correlated with observer-rated scores (Van Dyne et al., 2008). This could provide the individual with a concrete frame to support their reflections, come to emic and etic conclusions about their experiences and have the vocabulary to articulate their learning and cultural intelligence to others, such as prospective employers. Research on cultural intelligence has demonstrated that it can be used to predict adjustment, well-being, cultural judgement and decision making, and task performance in culturally diverse settings (Van Dyne et al., 2008).

Using the 20 items as a basis for reflection could occur at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of each international experience. Students could do a self-assessment using the scale. They could then identify certain areas from the items where they might want to develop, and set some specific learning goals accordingly. Mid-way through their experience they could then do another assessment that might be supplemented with an assessment by an observer, in the case of study abroad, or a supervisor, in the case of work abroad. A final assessment could be done at the end of their experience to examine areas of growth, goal achievement and provide the student with some clear feedback regarding their cultural intelligence. Students could be encouraged to document evidence that demonstrates their cultural intelligence in some of the items.

An example of how the CQ model demonstrates cultural intelligence to students could be examining any of the twenty items before and after the experience. From the meta-cognitive factor a student might reflect on ways that they have demonstrated the item: “I check the accuracy of my cultural knowledge as I interact with people from different cultures”. Have they been thinking about their own views and biases when interacting with others? Have they asked others for clarification on their understanding of the culture? Reflective questions exploring the meta-cognitive skills of checking assumptions, strategizing before engaging with others and cultural self-awareness could be informative and lead to “etic” understanding.
Cultural Intelligence: Developing students who can act local and think global

From the cognitive factor a student might choose to find ways to demonstrate their cultural intelligence in the item: “I know the rules (e.g. vocabulary, grammar) of other languages” by identifying their level of language capability. The might also be able to demonstrate their knowledge of business practices, economic and legal systems, values, norms and religious beliefs.

Within the motivational factor a student might look at the item: “I am sure I can deal with the stresses of adjusting to a culture that is new to me” by reflecting on times when they have done just that during their international experience. Students could offer examples of when they have demonstrated interest in other cultures, have experienced joy in exploring new cultures and acted with confidence when faced with challenges posed by international experiences.

For the behavioural factor a student might consider the item: “I change my non-verbal behaviour when a cross-cultural situation requires it” and give examples of how they have modified this behaviour accordingly. They might also describe culturally appropriate modifications to their verbal behaviours and to their speech acts such as the manner and content of their communications.

By considering all twenty items and reflecting on the ways they have demonstrated their capabilities with these items a student comes away armed with the ability to articulate their cultural intelligence to others. They should be able to provide concrete examples demonstrating their capabilities and be able to identify why these capabilities matter in the workplace and society.

Keeping in mind the learning theories of Kolb and Hughes-Weiner, we can see that we can use an instrument such as the CQS to support students as they embark on their learning journey of: the concrete experience, the disconfirmed expectation, the reflective observation, the development of emic knowledge, then abstract conceptualization, the development of etic knowledge and the ability to engage in abstract experimentation. Having the framework of the CQS could provide a means to navigate this journey, map out the milestones achieved and relay the stories to others.

Connecting Cultural Intelligence to Employability

Studies applying cultural intelligence as a framework to measure competence in a range of workplace settings show the connection to employability. In a study that gathered data from global managers about their use of cultural intelligence in their position, the researchers were able to not only show connections between the four-factors and twenty items in the CQS, but also identified additional items, such as knowledge of workplace behaviours and norms, that might be appropriate in the context of the workings of a global manager (Janssens & Cappelen, 2008).

Work done on expatriate success concludes that cultural intelligence plays a role in elements of success such as adjustment, performance, retention and career success (Shaffer & Miller, 2008). Shaffer and Miller’s work suggest that cultural intelligence plays a role as a “moderator” in strengthening positive inputs (such as openness to
new experiences) and lessening negative inputs (such as cultural novelty) to success. They also show how cultural intelligence acts in an “intervening” role, especially in language fluency and previous experience, to lead to greater success.

Considering the case of multi-cultural teams, Shokef and Erez (2008) concluded that facilitating employee’s global identity and cultural intelligence “may help them adapt to work in global environments”. With many current workplaces consisting of multi-cultural teams, this is a significant finding and supports the role that cultural intelligence can play in a number of contexts.

Capabilities in cultural intelligence have been linked to effectiveness in global managers, expatriates and effectiveness on multi-cultural teams. Clearly there is a connection between having successful cultural intelligence and working in an international context. Of interest would be to see how applicable cultural intelligence would be for individuals working domestically. Many organizations function in the global marketplace and many organizations have multiple internal cultures. Additionally, while we need graduates who can function in an international workplace, we also need them to be able to act local while they can think global.

Knowing that high levels of cultural intelligence can be of benefit in the workplace, the students who participated in this study now have concrete evidence of their cultural intelligence levels. They can speak to prospective employers about their cultural knowledge, the strategies they use to engage, the drive they have to succeed and the behaviours they have demonstrated that have led to successful cross-cultural interactions. These capabilities should enable these students to make a stronger case for themselves when seeking employment, make them more effective on the job and better able to enact their “global citizenship”.

Implications

This paper reviewed the current Canadian landscape for students’ international experiences and has raised several implications for future consideration. In developing programs with international experiences, greater emphasis might be placed on building a stronger connection between the international experience and a student’s employment prospects, and thus their capacity for global citizenship. A method for doing this was proposed based on the learning theories of Kolb and Hughes-Weiner and overlaying these theories with the framework of Earley and Ang’s theory of cultural intelligence. In so doing, student’s learning while on an international experience could be better supported, student’s could be better equipped to build the connection between the international experience and employability, and institutions could possibly increase participation rates in their international programs.

Finally, while the definition of “global citizen” is still developing, the concept can link to ideas of cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, neo-liberalism and environmentalism (Schattle, 2008). As such, whatever definition or slant one adopts, “global citizenship” can occur in a multitude of environments, including the
Cultural Intelligence: Developing students who can act local and think global

workplace. The development of cultural intelligence and the importance of that cultural intelligence to employability, and thus the ability to act as a “global citizen”, are all interconnected.

Work still needs to be done in examining the different kinds of international experiences that students undertake. Most studies lump study-abroad and work abroad programs together, and yet these are very different activities. They might very well develop cultural intelligence in different ways. Students might need different pre-departure training and on-site support for these two types of programs to ensure they have the best conditions possible within which to develop cultural intelligence. Research is required to show the specific contribution international co-operative education experiences might have in the development of cultural intelligence. It is quite possible that this form of experiential learning might result in the development of high levels of cultural intelligence, thus demonstrating the power of this educational model in creating highly employable citizens who can act local and think global.

References


Cultural Intelligence: Developing students who can act local and think global


