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ASSESSING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

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ABSTRACT. The use of self-awareness inventories and self-reflection journals or blogs is an important part of modern intercultural communication training. The number of methodological approaches is imprecise as there is no detailed knowledge. There is an overall lack of guidelines and framework for developing individual assessment tools.

This paper concerns the methodology applied when assessing intercultural communication competence. The use of the term 'competence' implies that what are being assessed are the skills and abilities a learner can draw upon when faced with an intercultural encounter. The use of the term 'communication' implies that the competences are expressed in an attempt to foster a successful outcome of the encounter. As assessment of these competences becomes more essential in the development of globalised business, educational and social contact, it is important that there is an attempt to understand the methodology of evaluation. The foundation of this paper is taken from the author's experience of constructing an assessment to examine the socio-cultural values in the development of a learner's intercultural communication competence. The focus of this paper is to release the methodological framework the author applied in the development of their own research tool for analysing ICC issues. The hope is that the guidelines and suggestions presented in the paper will inspire other researchers to build analytical tools and compose methodological frameworks to broaden the scope and understanding of ICC.

It would appear that there is a plethora of tools available for the trainer to measure an individual's Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). Michael Paige [10; 94] lists 35 different tools, often called Self-Awareness Inventories (SAI), which have been developed over the past 30 years and are used by organisations and institutions to measure individual ICC. The wide number of tools reflects the difficulty in measuring ICC. Paige categorises the tools in two broad categories – Organizational Assessment and Development and Personal Assessment and Development – with two sub categories for the former and nine sub categories for the latter. Each of the tools is adjudged, by Paige, to evaluate different – yet overlapping – aspects of ICC. Moreover, as the tools approach the same issue from different angles they also apply different methodology – some are pen and paper; others are portfolio; further, some are index and inventory based while

others are survey centred creating difficulties in comparison.

Undoubtedly, there are more tools available and in circulation than those listed by Paige. However, the situation is that given the field of evaluating ICC has been with us for over 30 years, there appears to be a small number of available and published assessment tools and methodology. The issue which is highlighted is the difficulty in developing and utilising assessment methods in ICC. As Paige [10; 85] states: "... surprisingly little has been written about instruments [assessment methods] as a component of intercultural training design and training pedagogy". Chris Brown and Kasey Knight [3] in their chapter "Introduction to Self-Awareness Inventories" in the *Intercultural Sourcebook (vol.2)* [7] is an attempt to close this gap as it discusses some basic principles and applications for self-awareness inventories (SAI) in ICC research.

The following chapters of the same book [7; 31-72] present several SAI including the Four Value Orientation Exercise (F-VOSAI) by Pierre Casse (1982, 1999), the Overseas Assignment Inventory (OAI) by Michael Tucker (1999), the Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory (CCAI) by Colleen Kelley and Judith Meyers (1999) and the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) by Mitchell Hammer. These SAI are amongst the most well known and most frequently applied assessment tools. They are pen and paper styled with respondents indicating their preference for a given statement or pair of statements. The results are calculated by assigning scores to each response and provide a fast and immediate indication of the respondent's ICC.

Another approach to the issue of evaluating ICC is conducted through the use of journals, logs, blogs and other written self-reflections of intercultural events. This approach is employed by Michael Byram and others [4] in the development of the INCA project. The structure of Byram's analysis is a combination of a short SAI and detailed self-reflection written after intercultural events. Byram's approach indicates that ICC is a long-term and continuous process.

What is it that we assess? To begin with, critical evaluation of the most widely used and available assessment tools leads to the conclusion that many of the available testing material and approaches blur the overall vision of what ICC is. As Darla Deardorff [5; 65-66] states: "There is no consensus on the terminology around intercultural competence. The terms used to refer to this concept vary by discipline (for example, those in social work use the term cultural competence, while those in engineering prefer to use global competence) and approach (the diversity field uses such terms as multicultural competence and intercultural maturity)."

The implication is that the terminology connected with "Intercultural" belongs to a variety of disciplines and because of its multidisciplinary membership it will, inevitably, have a multidisciplinary definition. Researchers have to initially acknowledge and define their own concept of intercultural which they will be analysing. This will require a discussion of theory which is connected directly with the discipline approach, but also draws from other approaches as applied to other disciplines. It is essential that the definition of intercultural which is developed by the researcher is inclusive of established understandings of the term and not exclusive for the planned project. This will ensure that there is an element of comparability between intercultural researches conducted in different academic disciplines. Even if the usage of the term is different, the understanding of what intercultural means should at least be based on similar foundations.

However, it is essential that we do not lose sight of the main aim of evaluating intercultural competence through discussions and arguments over semantics. A central point of intercultural research is to understand the abilities and skills an individual has to deal with other individuals and situations presented in different cultures. What is being evaluated is the individual's ability to deal with multicultural situations.

As Stanley Fish [6; 378] illustrates, the term multiculturalism comes "in at least two versions, boutique multiculturalism and strong multiculturalism." He continues to argue that the idea of boutique multiculturalism is characterised by ethnic restaurants, weekend festivals and the individual's superficial and cosmetic relationship to the objects of multiculturalism. This relationship is demonstrated by the limit of the individual with regards to affirmative action programmes and rap music, for example, as well as other cultural crossover that affects or offends the individual's "canons of civilized decency as they have either declared or assumed." [ibid.] In contrast, "a strong multiculturalist will want to accord a

deep respect to all cultures at their core" [6; 382]. Boutique multiculturalism or 'Boutique Interculturalism', to borrow Fish's phrasing, sees intercultural communication as something worth developing and investing time in as long as the outcomes do not impact upon their worldview or political opinion. Whereas strong multiculturalism or 'Strong Interculturalism' views the development of intercultural competence as an essential part of the process in moving towards an understanding of cultures, differences and working towards overcoming the potential problems and conflicts caused when two cultures meet.

Despite different academic disciplines employing a multitude of terms connected with intercultural competence the central tenant of evaluation is to explore multicultural attitudes and associated skills. It is essential to note that the skills and attitudes employed in intercultural events are very similar, if not identical, regardless of the academic approach. Gudykinst and Kim [8] as well as Ruben and Kealy [11] provide a nearly identical set of seven skills which are essential to ICC. The author's research and investigation of skills in ICC led to the proposal of six core competences: (1) Knowledge of Society; (2) Intercultural Awareness; (3) The Ability to Learn and Adapt to New Cultural Information; (4) Mindfulness of Identity in Intercultural Events; (5) Flexibility to New Situations; and (6) Empathy to Different Cultural Communicators. The author's competences, as well as those listed by others, are universal and applicable to all academic disciplines and approaches to ICC.

Methodological Approaches. The questioning and analysing of the developed concept of intercultural data will involve aspects of psychology, sociology and intrude upon some sensitive issues which many respondents are unwilling to share or talk about. Through our research we collect databases of information on our respondents, much of which is personal and private dealing with emotions. This information has to be dealt with ethically and stored in such a manner as to protect the identity of the individual(s). Our questioning also has to be ethical and at the same time balance our desire to investigate the mentality of the respondent in intercultural situations. Betina Szkudlarek [12; 976] from the University of Rotterdam considers: "[...] Without any sort of peer review, the critical issue of the ethical and moral responsibilities of intercultural trainers and their work remains mostly underplayed or unaddressed."

Michael Tucker, the creator of the very popular Overseas Assignment Inventory which is widely seen as among the first ICC tools, highlights that there is the tendency to answer SAI questions in a "Socially Desirable" manner

or to feel singled out by management to undertake the test. [13; 51] The respondent in any questionnaire or research process is the focus of our attention and our aim is to gather as much information as possible for our own purposes. Yet, we have to consider that the individual may be performing a role rather than reflecting deeper held views and that the respondent may pre-empt the questions and respond in a manner they feel is desired by the researcher and/or society at large. Unfortunately, the traditional pen and paper Self-Awareness Inventory (SAI) often falls into this trap. Although it is a useful and necessary tool, there has to be an acknowledgement by the researcher that the information gained through such a tool could be biased.

In this respect pen and paper SAIs focus on the theoretical framework whilst ignoring the practical dimension required. As stated, a trainee may possess the theory, yet the important factor is having the ability to put the theory into practice. What needs to be acknowledged is that intercultural competence is a 'doing' exercise that involves real life events and interactions. This is where surveys, which can be conducted over a long period of time, and self-awareness portfolios, such as the INCA project developed by Michael Byram et al. [4], can provide a greater understanding and illustration of the processes, skills and attributes employed by individuals in ICC. However, the length of time surveys and portfolios can take to gather data is prohibitive to some who see interculturalism as an exercise which can be learnt in the same way as maths or history (For further discussion on this topic see the author's articles [1] and [2]).

The ASSESS Framework. The various dimensions of intercultural competence should not present a problem to more researchers designing evaluation tools and working to develop different methodological frameworks to examine the issues connected with ICC. The author's own experience of creating a specific evaluation tool and methodology to assess the role of socio-cultural values in the development of intercultural communication competence has led to an understanding of why so few evaluation tools and methodologies for ICC exist on the market, but also a realisation of several key steps that should be considered in the development of evaluation tools. The author terms the three steps using the acronym ASSESS:

1. Aim – what is the purpose of the evaluation process and what is it that we desire to measure?

2. Structure and Style – which approach do we take towards the evaluation: a pen and paper inventory or long term portfolio?

3. Evaluation, Statistics and Show – how do we translate our interpretation of the score into a visual method which trainees can easily understand and react to?

1. *Aim.* As has already been stated, the nature of ICC is that it belongs to and draws from a wide variety of academic disciplines. Additionally, ICC research and evaluation is used for a multitude of reasons, but not always are these reasons academic research. In the current global climate of business and international connections, ICC is often used as an evaluation tool for managerial and professional development. As such ICC research is often associated with business training which results in the development of research and evaluation tools for commercial application. The upshot is that the aim of the commercial training tool is often different to that of the academic as the trainer's desire is to teach and produce results rather than investigate reasons and issues. In simple terms, the commercial tools are frequently designed with obtainable goals and objectives for the learners rather than delving deeper into the factors which cause intercultural communication problems or other research orientated problems.

This should not be taken as a criticism, but merely an acknowledgement of the variety of aims which an evaluation tool may have. As academics, we are free to use which ever tool we feel suits our purposes and a commercial tool may have more applicable results than a research tool if what we are looking for is an evaluative score of how well an individual shows intercultural competences. What is important is that the tool is designed to focus upon an aspect of intercultural competence relevant to the academic discipline or the designed outcome of the research programme. Essentially, it is better for researchers and professional associated with ICC to utilize an evaluation tool which is designed to fulfil the stated goals of the project.

In the author's experience it is also essential that we understand exactly what we are evaluating. ICC is seen as a set of skills which are numerous, overlapping and developed through experience, socialization and education. Evaluating ICC involves asking questions about opinions and attitudes towards certain intercultural phenomena, such as communicating with others and negotiating cultural differences. But it is also about evaluating the knowledge of cultural and social environments plus evaluating the individual's character and personality as well as experience and practical ability to deal with different events. In essence evaluating ICC is about evaluating the individual as a cultural being and understanding not only their current skills and abilities but also

about understanding what factors have helped to develop their ICC.

The Aim of the author's evaluation tool was to develop a profile of the socio-cultural values of individual intercultural communicator and the impact these values have upon developing ICC. The questions contained in the evaluation were designed to provide a score for the respondent's current ICC skills and abilities as well as being able to provide a history of events, experiences and education that have led to the present skills. This enables the research to narrate to the respondent the influence of their personal background and to be able to highlight significant intercultural events which have led to the respondent's current ICC skills and abilities. The goal of the research led to a two part evaluation tool with the first part creating a profile of the individual as an intercultural learner and the second part leading to an understanding of the issues which led to the development of the respondents' current ICC skills. For the author, the goal of the research made it impossible to evaluate ICC without asking questions which are sociological in nature.

The specific goal of the author's research was not covered by any pre-existing evaluation methodology which led to the necessity to adapt, modify and create a framework which was focused on the overall research objective. Several existing tools could have been used to generate data, but none were available which allowed the combination of current ICC skills with socio-cultural values. This is what led to the creation of a new evaluation methodology and tool. And in the process of working upon a new evaluation tool the author became quickly aware of how essential the Aim was in generating useful and applicable data. Therefore, in the author's opinion, an appropriate methodological framework in evaluating ICC it is essential for the research tool to have a clear and unambiguous Aim.

2. Structure and Style. Surveys, questionnaires and the like can be very daunting for respondents to complete as they are very much aware that they are being analysed. With specific regard to ICC it is important that we acknowledge that the process of evaluation is going to be a continuous event and that each evaluation exercise should not be considered as providing a right or wrong answer. Ideally, the author believes that observation and respondent's self-reflection is the most appropriate and least stressful methodology for gathering ICC data. However, such a process is lengthy and beyond the time limit of the majority of research projects.

Firstly, the use of a self-awareness inventory, or similar survey tool, is essential. Such tools are a standard part of any data

gathering exercise and a socially acceptable tool. They are also a very good method to introduce key terms, concepts and ideas which are part of ICC research. Yet, this is a double-edged sword as many of the terms and concepts used in research may not be understood by the layman. This issue came to the author's attention with the use of the term "Worldview". The author asked if the respondents were able to understand other people's Worldview and a majority of the respondents answered that this was an ability they possessed. However, during interview and further analysis it became clear that the respondent's Worldview was mostly connected with geography rather than socio-political and cultural factors which impact upon intercultural communication. Therefore, a lot of work has to be undertaken in ensuring that the structure of questioning is appropriate to the respondents and uses terminology that it is also within the general lexis of the society.

Secondly, the author believes that very often one SAI or survey is not sufficient. In terms of evaluating ICC development it is important to evaluate the respondents at several stages of their development. This presents problems with the structure and style of the SAI as it is possible that after taking several SAIs the respondents might begin to identify question types and patterns. Such a situation may lead to the data gathered informing the research more about how the respondents have learnt how to answer the survey rather than how to develop their ICC skills. The conclusion is that the researcher needs to vary techniques and draw from both qualitative and quantitative research methodology. Techniques such as participant observation, discussion and interviews as well as using a variety of SAIs and surveys are of value to ensuring that the gathered data is valid.

A frequently used method which is part of a lifelong learning approach to ICC but can be applicable to short term research goal is the development of personal journals or logs. Each respondent should be encouraged to record each intercultural encounter and be asked to reflect on the successes and failures of the event. In such a way the participant will be made to consider the communication event from a variety of stand points, not just their own view but also that of their partner. This will enhance the participant's empathy and mindfulness of the different elements which can influence successful intercultural communication.

The author's methodological approach involved the creation a 36 question SAI specifically focussing on ICC skills and abilities which was combined with 20 question personal background survey, addressing issues connected with the socio-cultural values of the respon-

dent. Additionally, the author acted as a participant observer by creating role play and discussion situations in which highlighted intercultural issues and allowed for evaluation of the manner in which the respondents behaved. Most importantly, and the most informative, was the utilization of interviews which allowed questioning of the respondents based on analysis of the data from the SAI and background survey as well as from the participant observation phase. Overall, the study took over 2 years to gather the data and provide sufficient information to proceed to analysis. However, the majority of that time was occupied by the participant observation and interview phase. The administering of the SAI and survey was completed in a short space of time.

3. *Evaluation, Statistics and Show.*

The process of evaluating data is often a lonely, tedious and monotonous task for the researcher. However, we should not consider the process of evaluation being solitary. The process of conducting ICC research involves several partners: the researcher/instructor, the participant/learner and the target audience. It is essential that we do not lose focus or sight of the various interested partners during the process of judging the data we have gathered.

One of the stated goals of ICC is to develop learner self-awareness and the inclusion of the learner in evaluating their own responses and data is an important part of the process. The learner should be included in the analysis of their data and drawing conclusions and suggestions for further action. As a researcher we can provide an interpretation of the data through use of statistical analysis and other database software. However, the only person who is able to fully understand and respond to the data is the respondent as they understand why they responded to each question as they did. They are the only people who can explain the rationale behind their replies and actions. As such, we as researchers should listen and incorporate their explanation into our process. We should not keep the data hidden from the respondent.

In the author's experience it was invaluable to ask each respondent to explain their rationale for answering the questions in the SAI relating to specific ICC skills. Often, the respondent was able to provide an illustrative example from their past experience or acknowledge they were expressing a socially accepted view. This allowed the author to gain further understanding in the processes which influenced the development of ICC within the study group. However, the author never felt that it was their duty to provide an evaluation which indicated the respondent's ICC level as each respondent was reacting to intercultural

events in a way that they believed was appropriate.

Participants need to grasp the numbers and data as quickly as possible and not have many different categories to compare, evaluate and process. This is why broad categories outweigh multiple categories. Importantly, the data is for the participant and should be made available immediately with an interpretation. This interpretation will provide the narrative for the student as they continue and develop throughout the course programme. It will also provide key areas in which the participant needs to develop and gain practical experience.

The evaluation has also to stress that there are no perfect scores and that the students are not trying to achieve a target percentage or total. It must be understood that ICC is a development of skills and these are enhanced and changed over time. This is why self-reflection and self-awareness through the use of journals or logs is important. In the SAI the instructor or the online programme can produce an instantaneous result. But for the evaluation of the journals or logs, the participants must be encouraged to share their thoughts and findings with others in the group in order to work towards a realization of how to practically apply the skills and abilities they are developing.

Conclusions. Despite a wide variety amongst academic disciplines of what the term Intercultural means the basic fact is that any assessment methodology is focused on the examination of the skills and abilities a learner brings to an intercultural event. Whether our assessment is for an intercultural training programme or academic research, the aim is for the evaluation to uncover the competences being used.

The evaluation of ICC is a balancing act between our desires as trainers and researchers to produce immediate results for our own purpose or the learners benefit. In academia there is a need to fit the research into a given timeframe and the use of an SAI is of clear benefit. Also, for the learner often the need is to have quick results to show progress and the advantages of undertaking the study programme. Yet at the same time, it is important that we acknowledge that ICC is a lifelong learning process and that it cannot always be taught in a short training course. The most a classroom environment can attain is the outline of problems, concepts and an increased self-awareness for the learner. That is why there is a clear need to balance and combine different assessment tools – such as an SAI with interviews and discussions – with the aim to elicit further details and information connected with the respondent's competences.

A further point has been raised by the discussion in this article. The definition of ICC is yet to be codified and is applied differently by academic disciplines. At one level this fact can be seen to be a problem which needs to be addressed with a single and accepted definition. However, as has been illustrated, the concept of ICC draws upon a multidisciplinary origin and different intercultural situations require different competences. Therefore, there is a need for each academic approach to work towards a broadening of the concepts of ICC and the competences needed for successful communication. This requires a sharing of data of academic and training methodology.

The final conclusion is the necessity for a greater number of approaches and a greater development of intercultural assessment tools. With access to more information it would be possible to develop different and more specialised tools which are applicable to specific competences or concepts of ICC. At present the lack of literature and the lack of widely available knowledge of the approaches being taken in regards to ICC assessment is an area which has to be addressed. I hope that the information in this article can go some way towards opening a discussion on ICC assessment and encourage more researchers to develop their own ICC assessment tools and then share them with others.

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