

Cultural awareness and sensitivity: Foundational experiences in a Level 1 Psychology course

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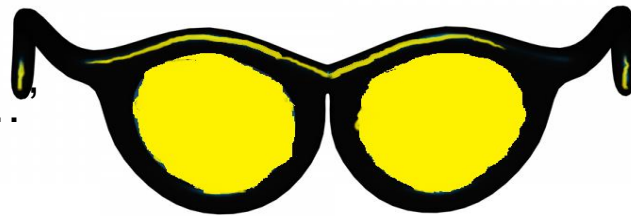
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The story of Blue Lenses and Yellow Lenses

- Once upon a time...
- There was a beautiful planet, and everything on it was blue. The people were born with blue glasses.
- That was quite alright, people never complained about it. In fact they enjoyed seeing the world in shades of blue. They were even proud of it.
- But one day...one of them was bored with this little planet. He built a starship and sailed to the stars. He wandered about the universe for a long time. And suddenly, he found it – a new planet.
- It had parts consisting of land and others covered with water. There were people living on this planet too!
- They also had something special, something they received at birth...yellow glasses.
- They offered our traveller a pair of yellow glasses and a tour around the whole planet.
- He marvelled at everything he could see, commented, expressed his emotions out loud... He felt good there.
- Eventually however, he felt homesick. He sailed back on his starship and finally he arrived home. In front of all the people on the planet he was asked: “How was this *new* planet?”
- And with a smile, he answered:
“It was beautiful...”; and then,
with dreamy eyes he added: “All green...”



The Power of Culture: Perceptions, Thoughts, Emotions

- The story of blue lenses and yellow lenses illustrates how our cultures influence our perceptions, thoughts and emotions.
- Culture is like a pair of lenses that colour the world we live in and consequently through these lenses, our perception of things around us is shaped, which in turn generate specific thoughts/views and corresponding emotions.
- Each group that we are associated with carries its own culture. Hence, depending on the different cultural groups of which we are a member, we wear a number of lenses.
- The lens that we wear most will be from the culture group that we are most affiliated with the view through that pair of lenses we evaluate, judge and make sense of our environment and the people in it.

Background: Helping online students understand the power of culture

- USQ undergraduate psychology students enrolled in a compulsory Level 1 course “Cross-cultural and Indigenous Psychology” which addresses the intercultural communication competency.
- The major assignment entails a guided reflection exercise where students report their cognitions and emotions, and link their responses to an implicit cultural theory and an actual construct covered in the course.
- As the majority of the students are enrolled in ‘online’ mode (their studies are conducted via the internet), it is difficult to provide practical experiences to these students.
- The pilot project was therefore designed to prepare students for the major assignment and highlight opportunities to develop cultural awareness and sensitivity.

The learning process underscoring the project

The three step learning process that underscored the activities:

Step 1) Experience activities. Helped student become aware of their cultural lenses by showing videos/picture/narratives and stories that were foreign or unusual, and challenging to their daily experiences. Such exposure would generate different thoughts and emotions depending on the participant's background.

Step 2) Self reflection. Engaged participants in a self reflective process to identify their cultural lenses. Then helped them put these lenses down and put on a new cultural lenses for a change.

Step 3) Sharing and gaining insights. Provided a forum where students could share their thoughts and emotions, and gain new insights

Interactive activities to demonstrate the link between cultural lenses and our perceptions/thoughts/emotions

- 1) Korean culinary practices #
- 2) Help seeking behaviour and Female Circumcision
- 3) An anthropological report on the *Nacerima* tribe
- 4) The meaning of daily household items and culture (chopsticks)
- 5) Morale dilemma (Abigail and the River of Sorrow) #

illustrated in this presentation

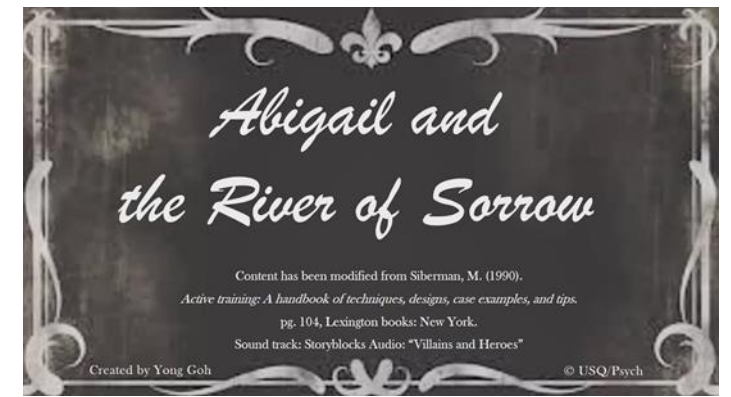


Korean culinary practices

- This is a video about three strangers in Korea who are small restaurant owners. They have only known each other for about a month, and they are sharing a bowl of noodles made by one of them.
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- Notice how
 - a) the younger lady let the man eat first (seniority is important in Korea), and
 - b) how they all share the food, chopsticks and bowl together.
 - Food sharing in this way is common in Korea. It reflects the collective value of 'mine is yours' and vice versa. In Korean it is often called 'Uri' which is loosely translated as 'ours', and it is often applied when cultivating relationships.
 - This video allows students to understand that what is seemingly wrong and not normal from their perspective, is actually quite normal and right to others from a different culture. By explaining the Korean culture and history, students begin to learn to see the videos from another's lenses (the Korean lenses – often with their own lenses on as well).



Morale dilemma (Abigail and the River of Sorrow)



- Students watch a silent film about an unrequited love story and are then required to rank the four characters in the film from most objectionable to least objectionable based on what the characters have done in the film.
- This exercise allows students to share their ranking and reasons, and in doing so come to an awareness of:
 - how different and diverse their values can be,
 - how deeply values (cultural, social, political and so on) can influence them, and
 - how culture can determine their views and decision as basic as what is right and wrong.

The theory that underpins the 5 exercises: Kolb's experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984)

Three components of Kolb's cycle were applied:
Concrete Experience, *Reflective Observation*, and
Abstract Conceptualisation.

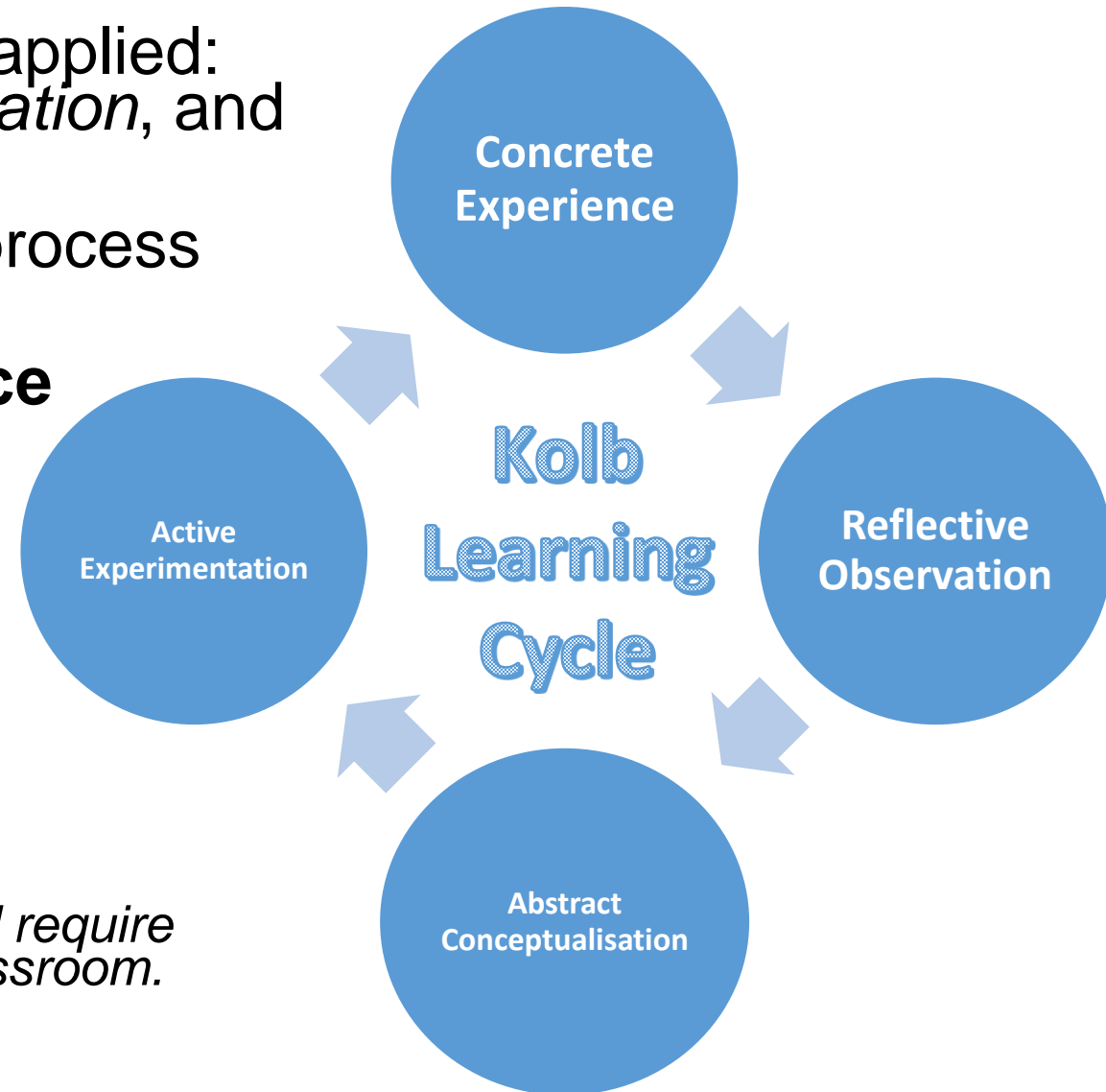
They correspond to the 3 step learning process
as mentioned earlier.

1. Experience the 5 activities- **Experience**
(*Concrete Experience*)

2. Self reflection- **Reflect**
(*Reflective Observation*)

3. Sharing thoughts and emotions, and
gaining new insights- **Share**
(*Abstract Conceptualisation*)

*Active Experimentation is left out because this would require
students to apply their new learnings outside the classroom.*



Insights to be gained from the 3 components of Kolb's experiential learning cycle

The 3 components, with their associated 3 learning steps/process, help students gain insights into the following:

- Looking at the world from another cultural perspective is possible and is not daunting or frightening.
- Different Cultural lenses are often different perspectives of the same reality that we are in.
- The 3 learning steps/process of Experience, Reflect, and Share is an important part of enhancing cross cultural awareness and personal development

Preliminary Outcomes

We have conducted surveys for some of the exercises to determine their degree of effectiveness.

For example, Exercise 1: Korean eating and culinary practices

- Pre and post exercise surveys (5 point scale) were administered to participating students.
- SPSS T-test comparison of means scores between pre and post exercise surveys yielded significant improvement in students' awareness of how culture influences their thoughts and emotions, $p = .02$
 - Before exercise mean awareness = 3.25 (n=83)
 - After exercise mean awareness = 3.53 (n= 64)
- 72% (ranking of 4 and above in a 5 point Likert scale) of the participants (n=64) noted better understanding on how to manage foreign confronting encounters.

The AIDEE Approach

The following are the recommended key features of cultural awareness and sensitivity exercises :

- 1) **Application:** There is a need to experience what were taught in cross cultural course. The concepts and principles taught need to be experienced and eventually be applied to enhance one's learning.
- 2) **Introspection:** There should be opportunities for self reflection on the experience gained to better understand oneself, and how one interacts with the world.
- 3) **Discussion:** These new experience/understanding should be shared and discussed with fellow students to generate new insights.
- 4) **Enjoyment:** The process and exercises are fun and engaging to instil in students a positive experience such that they will continue to explore the world and different cultures.
- 5) **Environment:** The above four features should be predicated on a learning environment with mutual respect, sensitivity and humility; they set the ground on which cultural awareness and learning can take place safely.

Future learning and teaching

We plan to develop this series of cultural awareness and sensitivity exercises in the following directions:

- Enhance student's experiential learning further; e.g. extending learning to application strategies and opportunities, and extending experiential learning from visual/audio to tactile and tastes modes.
- Develop culture awareness and sensitivity training models and workshop structures that can be customised to different groups and contexts.
- Create multiple delivery modes of training to increase accessibility, e.g., training apps, online and face to face training.

References

Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development* (Vol. 1). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.