

Intercultural Immersions and Cultural Competency: Preparing Seminarians to Minister in Today's Global Reality

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Current increases in population migration, movement, and co-existence are theological opportunities for Christians. These increases allow the appreciation of the diverse ways in which God shines through the narratives of people from culturally different backgrounds. The capacity to think beyond limiting worldviews is critical for competent and effective ministry in domestic and global contexts in which cultures co-exist. The degree to which we are successful in our ministry mirrors the degree to which we are

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Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry

willing to learn about and interact with those who exist beyond our worldview. Limiting worldviews, however, too often preclude appreciation of or connection with those who are different, and such views favor a sense of superiority and/or preferred distance. The inability to transcend limited worldviews can result in hurt feelings, disrespect, or the absence of relationship. Sometimes, not understanding and respecting cultural difference is a matter of life and death. Just one example is an English-only speaking hospital chaplain, who was paged to be with a young, poor, Spanish-only speaking couple whose two-year-old daughter was in critical condition after a fall down a set of stairs. On the basis of inadequate communication with the couple, the chaplain calls family services, judging the parents to be unfit to care for their child. A lack of cultural competency can have serious consequences.

For those of us involved in ministry formation, and specifically field education, how we prepare students for culturally competent ministry is important. What methods of education, practices in supervision, programs of continuing education and professional guidelines cultivate an increasing capacity for cultural competency?

The authors evaluated the effectiveness of short-term intercultural immersion programs within the context of seminary field education to prepare seminarians for culturally competent ministry. The authors conducted on-line surveys and phone interviews of Wesley Theological Seminary graduates and faculty and staff of thirty-four Association of Theological Schools seminaries. Two questions guided the research, funded by the Association of Theological Field Educators (ATFE): Is an intercultural immersion experience transformative? Do students realize an increased capacity for cross-cultural competency in ministry?

INTERCULTURAL IMMERSIONS

In response to the Association of Theological School's globalization standard¹ many seminaries have introduced intercultural immersions into their curriculum to deepen their students' cultural self-understanding and to develop their understanding and appreciation of persons of culturally different backgrounds. The implementation of intercultural immersion programs varies across seminaries. These immersions may be required or an elective, faculty-led only or a combination of faculty and non-faculty led immer-

sions, and a required length from eight days to two weeks as a norm. The majority of seminaries require some type of pre-immersion orientation and a debriefing session(s) on the return to campus. While a few seminaries are able to pay the total cost for a student's immersion, for the majority, students pay the immersion expense with the help of limited scholarship funds.

While some seminaries require short-term immersions, others provide for cultural competency development in ministry through cross-cultural internship placements. Recent higher education research has pointed out that short-term programs of two or three weeks, properly organized, with attention to opportunities for deep reflection during the immersion, can have significant impact on the lives of students and the development of cultural competency.² Short-term immersions are the norm among seminaries and do not presume the development of language skills. Roman Catholic seminaries often focus on acquisition of language skills. Students live and study in another culture for approximately three months. Students in mission-oriented seminaries spend three to six months on ministering in an international denominational mission setting.

When students become aware of the limitations of their own culture, integrate this into shifted self-understandings, and make different choices based on the integrated information, these cultural educational experiences become transformational. Students experiencing such transformation are more likely to continue to seek and acquire competencies that equip them to be in effective ministry with people of other cultures.

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCY

Intercultural competency is an ability to effectively interact and minister with people of other cultures. Higher education research literature categorizes intercultural competencies as the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable someone to be effective in interpersonal behavior across cultural contexts.³

In her doctoral dissertation, Darla K. Deardorff surveyed and interviewed experts in the field of intercultural studies, as well as administrators in higher education, to ascertain a consensus on their understanding of intercultural competency.⁴ Deardorff found agreement that the acquisition of intercultural competency involves a process and is developmental. This

is congruent with the work of Milton Bennett, a pioneer in the area of intercultural studies, who conceptualized intercultural competence as a developmental model.⁵ Bennett defines the attainment of intercultural competency as a process “in which individuals progress along a continuum toward the goal of successful acquisition of the international perspective.”⁶

Building upon the work of interculturalists such as Bennett, Deardorff developed a competency “Pyramid Model.”⁷ This model summarizes the outcomes (internal and external) and competency areas (attitudes, knowledge, and skills) agreed to by her subjects. Our research uses Deardorff’s model (figure 1) as a conceptual framework for cultural competency capacity.

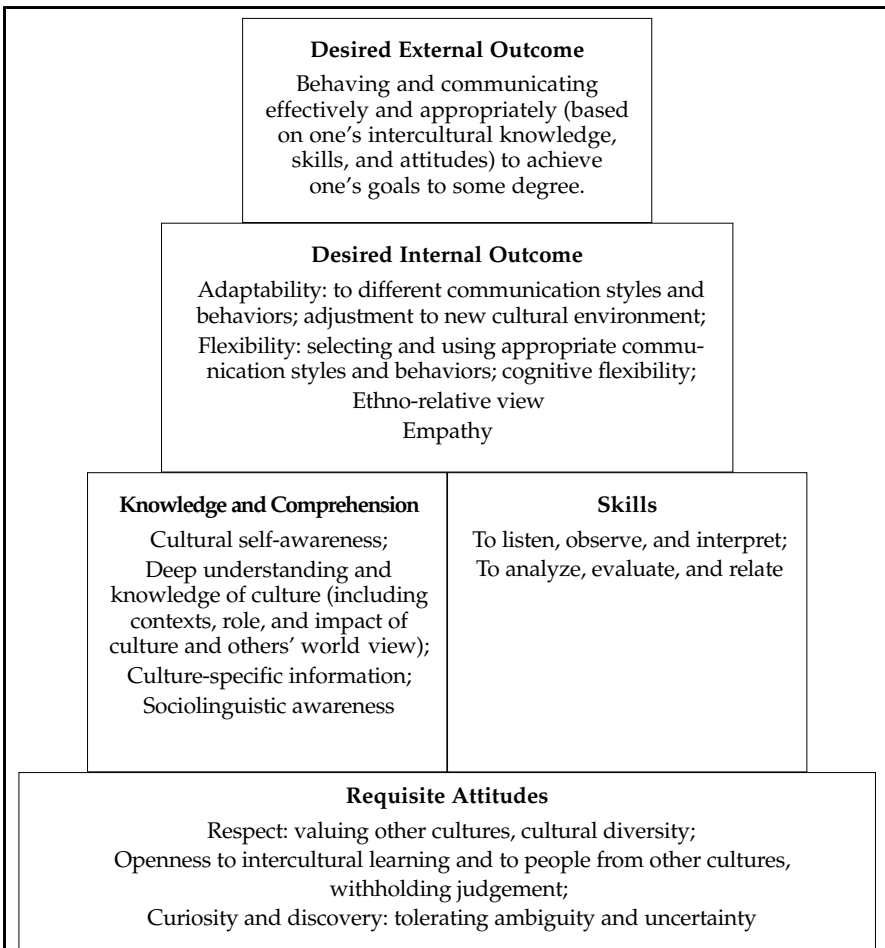


Figure 1. Intercultural Competence Pyramid Model³

TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION

Intercultural immersions are frequently described as transforming by both students and faculty. Adult education theorist Jack Mezirow developed the theory of transformative learning while at Columbia University. Mezirow observed that learning experiences provided an opportunity for students to “transform problematic frames of reference—sets of fixed assumptions and expectations...to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change.”⁸ According to Mezirow transformation is a shift in perspective, whereby a person becomes critically aware of the limitations of their worldview and as a result expands this worldview.⁹

Mezirow names the initial experience as a “disorienting dilemma” where the immersion context reveals to students that their worldview, shaped by their context of origin, bound by the assumptions and nature of their own culture, is too limited to interpret the immersion culture. This disorientation is an opportunity to reconsider these newly illuminated assumptions of their worldview.

Further stages of Mezirow’s theory of transformation include: exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions; planning of a course of action; acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans; building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; and a reintegration of resultant effects into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective.¹⁰ These stages comprise a process and take place over a course of time.

It is in the later stages of transformation that cultural competency is learned and captured. The intercultural immersion can be a transformative learning experience that opens, or further opens, the seminarian to conceptualize the existence of cultures other than his own; to hold as sacred the worth of other cultural expressions; to then find value in actively seeking, practicing, and acquiring the attitudes, knowledge, and skills to successfully relate across cultural differences; and thereby to engender culturally competent ministry practices.

IMMERSIONS AT WESLEY THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

The intercultural immersion is a requirement for all Master of Arts (M.A.) and Master of Divinity (M.Div.) students at Wesley Theological Seminary

(WTS). The fourteen-day immersion requirement includes a general orientation to cultural values and the immersion process. In the case of faculty-led immersions, additional sessions focus on the destination culture and preparation for travel. Following the immersion, students write an integrative paper with an emphasis on theological reflection. The course requirement ends with group debriefing sessions. Students then share their immersion experience with audiences outside of the seminary.

Wesley students also have the option to design their own immersion experience. A proposal, which must meet the specified immersion criteria, is prepared for the Practice in Ministry and Mission Immersion Committee. This option provides students with the opportunity to be immersed in a culture for which they have a strong interest, but one that is not accessible through offered programs.

The Research

Generally stated, the goal of immersion programs is to provide adequate and appropriate preparation for ministry and mission within a many-cultured global reality. To explore this goal, M.A. and M.Div. graduates of WTS and Association of Theological Schools (ATS) faculty at thirty-four other seminaries participated in a research project consisting of an on-line survey and phone interviews. The ATS faculty participants for this research were self-selected from a larger group of ATS seminaries (eighty-nine), who indicated in a prior survey that their school required or offered as an elective an intercultural immersion experience. Thirty-four faculty members completed the on-line survey, and nineteen were interviewed.

Slightly more than one hundred Wesley graduates responded to an on-line survey, which asked them to share if and how the immersion was an effective learning experience. The survey also asked what the experience has meant for them personally and for their ministry post-graduation. Twenty of these graduates were randomly selected and interviewed by phone to further explore the impact of the immersion on their ministry.

Research Findings: General

Both survey and interview data reveal that the intercultural immersion is a significant experience for most students and has a long lasting impact on their lives. For example, when asked to describe their immersion experience, forty-seven percent of Wesley graduates responded that it was "a highlight of my seminary studies," sixty-five percent indicated that it

“sensitized me to another culture,” and forty-four percent responded, “it was a life-changing experience.” Ninety-four percent of ATS faculty reported that the most often stated response by students about their immersion was “it was a transforming experience,” and forty-three percent reported that the second most frequent response from students was “it was the best thing I’ve experienced in seminary.”

The opportunity to become aware of and suspend limiting world-views to see the world and church as others see it was a welcome challenge. As one graduate said: “I had to set aside the lenses through which I viewed the church and the world and learn to observe at a more basic level, to defer conclusions in the interest of just taking in images, and to let those images reveal the truth at the core of the experience.” Another graduate shared that her immersion, “reinforced my understanding of how much of who I am is shaped by my cultural background and environment.” “I was reminded that there are lots of ways of living life and my way isn’t the only way or the right way.”

The immersion was not, however, deemed valuable by all students. Ten percent of the Wesley graduates indicated “it was OK,” while two-percent stated it was a “waste of time and money.” Reasons for these responses varied from frustration about the degree requirement to a dissatisfaction with the immersion experience not living up to expectations. ATS faculty also reported negative responses from students: “it was not worth the time and money” (0.6 percent). Yet, overall, the majority of graduates and ATS faculty report immersions as an impactful, important method for seminary education for cultural competency.

RESEARCH FINDINGS: INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCY

Do intercultural immersion experiences contribute to competency in ministering with persons of other cultures? Sixty-two percent of graduates responded “yes.” Having an attitude of openness to people from other cultures and possessing a respect for and acceptance of differences were the competencies most often named by students. One graduate responded, “The skill most needed is openness. We are all too quick to judge people who don’t do things the way we do. It limits God’s grace.” Words such as sensitivity, awareness, openness, understanding, confidence, compassion, empathy, and perspective were used to describe ways in which immersion

experience impacted their formation for ministry. For example, the immersion “helped me communicate with other cultures and be a better listener,” “increased my ability to see the world as others see it,” “helped me personalize a culture,” “helped me be more confident in reaching out to other cultures,” and “increased my objectivity about people.”

Knowledge of one’s own and another’s culture is also an important component of cultural competency. Such knowledge includes an understanding of the contexts, role, and impact of culture on one’s worldview:¹¹ “Because of my immersion I now have the knowledge needed to share the traditional Indian stories with those whom I minister. Knowledge of the stories and rituals is important.”

The ability to listen, observe, and more openly interpret the behavior of others are basic skills in any ministry and all the more so when trying to effectively minister within an cultural context with varied languages, values, non-verbal behaviors, traditions, and customs: “I think the big one is stopping to listen to what something means to people from their own perspective instead of rushing in to interpret it from my perspective.” Given that there are cultural differences and perspectives among peoples, it is important to “learn to wait and see what something means for another person.”

Students also develop new or increased capacity to feel empathy and compassion for others and become “emotionally connected.” An ATS faculty member reported that after an immersion to Indonesia he noticed a common theme in the student papers. Because of their interaction with those of the Muslim faith, students began to identify with them on a personal level; they “came to understand they were highly intelligent, religious, and not terrorists.” One student commented that there would always be an emotional connection to those in that part of the world because they have become ‘her people’ too.

Research Findings: Transformation

The majority (eighty-eight percent) of Wesley graduates interviewed described their immersion as transformative, and that a shift in worldview often resulted in a more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally flexible worldview that is irreversible. Phrases, such as “I will never be the same again” and “It was a life-changing experience,” capture this description. In the real estate world, the age-old maxim is “location,

location, location." In ministry, we can say it is "context, context, context." Understanding the context of the people among whom we minister is crucial to being effective.

An often-mentioned consequence of an immersion experience is a new sensitivity to stereotypes, racist references, and prejudicial attitudes. Students who grew in such sensitivity reported working at making changes in their own language and viewpoints, as well as working to bring about shifts in the perspectives of those whom they serve. For many graduates, the short-term intercultural immersion served as an initial stage of transformation, a process that can take place over time.

Reflection on Findings

What have we learned about intercultural immersions as a method of seminary preparation for cultivating cultural competency for ministry?

Pre-immersion preparation is critical for the learning process. This takes several forms including directed reading on a specific culture, cultural orientation sessions, and group identity development. One of the ATS faculty participants noted the need among his students for serious academic cultural study and added a pre-requisite course. A Wesley faculty leader found the necessity for large groups to do group building. Two weeks of constant travel together, disorienting experiences, sharing rooms, and simply being with one another can produce conflict. Thoughtful pre-immersion preparation is invaluable.

Consideration needs to be given to the notion that the primary immersion culture for group immersions is the group itself. The diversity of students due to age, race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic backgrounds creates its own intercultural context. Being immersed in a new cultural situation compounds this. Thus, the cultural dynamics of the group must be reflected upon as part of the learning experience. This diversity needs to be explicitly included in the learning and reflection process.

The issue of student expectations needs to be addressed in any pre-immersion preparation. Expectations can be quite different for students for whom the immersion is a requirement than for those for whom it is an elective. Given that it is a requirement for graduation at Wesley, it is important during orientation sessions to elicit any existing resistance to the requirement. Some students resist the requirement feeling that their previous experience of living in other cultures for significant time periods should be

seen as a fulfillment of the requirement. It is important to help students recognize that they are now in a new context for their life and call, and that they should participate in a group immersion in which they have the opportunity to explore the theological and ministry issues of intercultural engagement.

A key component for seminary faculty-led immersions is the opportunity to engage in theological reflection during the immersion experience. Whatever the format of such reflection, the time to focus on daily experiences and grapple with scriptural and theological issues is regarded as important. Skilled design in the reflective process is needed—even more so when the cultural context has similarity to the culture of the student. These reflections make time for integration by making connections with the tradition and at the same time struggling with disconcerting theological realities. Within a culturally different context, scripture takes on new meanings and thus becomes transformative.

The debriefing component has been a challenge at Wesley. Given the diversity of students and the number of part-time students, it is difficult to identify adequate blocks of time for consideration of the impact of the immersion. In order to address this issue, faculty leaders have been encouraged to plan a debriefing day at the end of the immersion prior to the return trip home. The author's own experience with implementing this kind of debriefing was very positive since it provided for reflection while still within the cultural milieu. Chapel celebrations, discussion forums, seminary newsletter reflection articles, and community presentations all serve to share the experiences within the seminary and the wider church community, and provide students with avenues for integration of their experiences and opportunities to translate what they have learned.

SOME FINAL QUESTIONS AND ISSUES

The research process and the data acquired raise questions for both the implementation and improvement of intercultural immersion programs. Pre-immersion orientation needs to focus on several factors. (1) The attributes of intercultural competency need to be inserted at the start of the immersion process as stated expectations during pre-immersion activities. (2) Critically reflective questions to probe the depths of the experience should be proposed to the participants during the preparation phase of

their immersion experience. (3) The attainment of specific attributes needs to be included in the curriculum design of each planned immersion trip. What learning experiences within the immersion itself will help the attainment of such competencies?

The seminary itself must also model the intercultural competency outcomes named by the program. For example, the seminary must understand itself as a culture bound institution, with a particular worldview and a commitment to an interactive engagement in the global reality. How will changes in perspective impact subsequent seminary studies and future ministry? How will the changes resulting from immersions impact the seminary culture, its traditions, customs, and curriculum?

Each student comes to an immersion process and experience with her unique cultural self-identity that has been formed through a lifetime of interactions with a multitude of social contexts. This identity presents those directing an immersion program with the task of challenging participants to explore their current cultural self-identity and self-understanding in preparation for the encounter and interaction with another culture. To be comprehensive, orientation sessions should address those areas that researchers have found to be pertinent to the attainment of intercultural competency: requisite attitudes, knowledge, and skills. What pedagogical approaches/practices within the orientation and debriefing sessions best support the overall processes of personal transformation and expansion of intercultural competencies?

The development of cultural competencies is a process. It is important to recognize that immersions are not the only context for cultural learning. All that can be learned from other cultures as part of a seminary curriculum immersion program cannot be learned in two weeks. For some students their immersion is part of a long history of intercultural experience, and for others it is the beginning of a new adventure. A significant challenge for seminary educators is inserting into both the larger curriculum and community *ethos* ways for students to translate their immersion experience and learning into cultural relationships in the local community.

Research data give evidence that intercultural immersions are an important part of seminary education for intercultural ministry competency in our many-cultured domestic and global reality. Through transformation of their own worldviews, students are more likely to be open to learning

the competencies necessary to minister effectively with individuals and communities of different cultures.

Intercultural immersion programs are gradually becoming a component of curricula at North American seminaries. The common goal is to intentionally prepare students for ministry and mission in a multicultural global reality. The intercultural immersion experience and the connections formed by students and seminaries throughout the world are transforming the face of theological education and hopefully the effectiveness of church leaders ministering in today's global reality.

NOTES

1. Association of Theological Schools, "General Institutional Standards," (Pittsburgh, Penn: ATS, 1996), section 3.2.4.2, p. 7.
2. Janet Hulstrand, "Education Abroad on the Fast Track," *International Educator* (May and June 2006): 46-55.
3. Darla K. Deardorff, "The Identification and Assessment of Intercultural Competence as a Student Outcome of Internalization at Institutions of Higher Education in the United States" (Ph.D. Dissertation, North Carolina State University, 2004).
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid, 42.
6. M. J. Bennett, "Towards ethnorelativism: A developmental model of intercultural sensitivity," in *Education for the Intercultural Experience*, 2nd ed., ed. R. M. Paige (Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, 1993), 24.
7. Deardorff, "The Identification and Assessment of Intercultural Competence," 196.
8. J. Mezirow, "Transformative Learning as Discourse," *Journal of Transformative Education* 1, no. 1 (2003): 58-63.
9. Ibid.
10. J. Mezirow, *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 22.
11. Deardorff, "The Identification and Assessment of Intercultural Competence," 196.