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The Craft of Cross-Cultural Engagement

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Abstract
How might Extension professionals become proficient in engaging communities with knowledge that does not correspond to our own scientific understandings? Cross-cultural engagement (CCE) requires a commitment toward building trust as a foundation for greater relationship and asks us to think within other worldviews in order to understand divergent knowledge. This is quite different from learning about other worldviews from a familiar or scientific perspective. CCE brings diversity of perspective and with it new possibilities for innovation at land-grant universities.

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Introduction

What Is Cross-Cultural Engagement?

Cross-cultural engagement (CCE) is a distinct type of community-based engagement, partnering with citizens whose knowledge does not necessarily correspond to scientific models or Eurocentric worldviews (Hassel, 2004). Although "non-scientific" knowledge is often considered "off limits" at research universities, the practice of CCE embraces ancient or ancestral knowledge understandings that may be valuable resources for solving societal problems. CCE practice has the following characteristics:

- It is a community-based, led, and owned effort to address a pressing societal problem.
- It has a mission/purpose consistent with the land-grant mission.
- It employs participatory qualitative action research (Greenwood & Levin, 1998).
- It welcomes subject matter expertise that lies beyond scientific understandings.
- It integrates discovery, learning, and engagement in a seamless manner.

Why Is CCE Needed?

In most cases, Extension professionals have focused on how to get diverse stakeholders to understand the western/scientific view of the world prevailing in land-grant research universities. But little attention has focused on getting academic professionals to understand knowledge systems within communities that lie beyond a western/scientific orientation. Because their knowledge is usually excluded from serious academic consideration, community-based partners in CCE may feel little reason to trust working with land-grant research universities (Hassel, 2004).

CCE is a practice in which scientists and Extension professionals can learn to recognize and better understand the knowledge that underserved stakeholders bring to the table. It focuses explicit attention on embedded ideas about how the world works--worldviews and "ways of knowing." A worldview can be defined as basic assumptions and beliefs that form the basis of a people's comprehension of the world (Cajete, 2000). "Ways of knowing" refers to epistemology--differences in the nature of knowledge and its construction, including what counts as knowledge and the degree to which knowledge is certain (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001). These ideas are elaborated below.

By directing attention toward understanding the world from within different worldview orientations, CCE represents a means of helping Extension professionals to better appreciate the existence and academic value of multiple worldviews. In bringing voices of diverse communities together with the work of the academy, both benefits and challenges arise for Extension professionals who wish to practice CCE (Hassel, 2004).

What Are the Benefits and Challenges of CCE?

The practice or "craft" of CCE offers a path for academic professionals to respectfully engage knowledge that lies beyond the boundaries of conventional scientific thought. By bringing diversity of perspective to academic work, CCE enhances opportunities for innovation. Greater innovation can generate solutions to societal problems and lead to wealth creation for communities (Barker, 2000). Conducted appropriately, the craft of CCE represents a means to:

- Build long-term, working relationships with communities that have not benefited from the work of land-grant universities.

- Include alternative perspectives, ideas, and understandings that can reframe pressing societal problems.

- Stimulate innovation and discovery by bringing together divergent ways of knowing.

- Create educational approaches that are inclusive of multiple worldviews and ways of knowing.

- Bring cultural diversity and breadth of perspective to the core of the academic enterprise at land-grant research universities.

The challenges of CCE include:

- Navigating scientific perspectives that tend to exclude diverse ways of knowing.

- Navigating taboos within academic culture around including knowledge originating beyond the "research base."

- Recognizing and involving community-based subject matter experts without relying upon academic credentials or scientific validation.

- Yielding programmatic leadership and decision-making authority to community-based experts and stakeholders.

Legitimate opportunities for the "two way" dialogue essential to CCE can occur if academic professionals are open to learning about knowledge systems beyond those of a western/scientific orientation.

CCE as a Two-Way Process

In engaging diverse communities, CCE practice emphasizes community-based partners as a valuable source of knowledge. In this regard, CCE builds upon the concepts of engagement put forward by NASULGC (1999a): " . . . two-way partnerships, reciprocal relationships between university and community defined by mutual respect for the strengths of each" where the "purpose of engagement is not to provide the university's superior expertise to the community, but to encourage joint academic-community definitions of problems, solutions and success."

Holland (2001) explicitly stated the ideal that engagement with "external constituencies" can benefit communities while improving the university:

> An engaged institution is committed to direct interaction with external constituencies and communities through the mutually-beneficial exchange, exploration, and application of knowledge, expertise and information. These interactions enrich and expand the learning and discovery functions of the academic institution while also enhancing community capacity.

In the case of CCE, participants often feel that they have been denied opportunities for the kind of two-way exchange described above. For example, indigenous education has helped American Indian people to understand the western/scientific view of the world, but little help is available to academic professionals wanting to understand indigenous worldviews (Semali & Kincheloe, 1999). Two-way exchange implies building communicative space perceived by all who participate as "a level playing field" for authentic exchange of perspectives (Hassel, 2004). Given our history of a more one-sided educator-delivery model, creating and maintaining what everyone perceives as a level playing field can be a challenge, but it is a prerequisite for further progress.

Role Shift for Academic Professionals

Academic and Extension professionals who create and maintain authentic communication are likely to perceive a shift in their professional role from content expert to one that feels more like an acolyte or co-learner attempting to get up to speed (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Simpson & Driben,

2000). This is to be taken as a positive sign, even though it may feel awkward at first. It is a sign of engaging within another way of understanding the world that may be completely unfamiliar. Practicing skillfully the craft of CCE requires one to think within a knowledge system that lies beyond the boundaries of a western/scientific perspective. This skill can be facilitated by appreciation for the deeper worldview and epistemic aspects of cultural diversity.

Understanding CCE Through the Concept of Worldview

The concept of worldview is critical to practicing CCE. This is because scientific inquiry, like any other form of human thought and expression, is based upon culturally constructed worldviews about how the world works (Wallace, 2000). As mentioned earlier, a worldview represents a set of assumptions and beliefs that form the basis of a people's comprehension of the world (Cajete, 2000). A worldview is comprised of cultural "givens," basic assumptions and metaphysical ideas that tend to be taken for granted and as non-negotiable. It represents the least visible, yet most entrenched aspect of our thinking.

Most of us are not conscious of our worldview because it is not consciously learned so much as implicitly absorbed from our surrounding culture. If a worldview goes unchallenged, members may find behavior based on any other premise almost inconceivable. For example, a materialistic worldview is so entrenched within scientific thinking that it has become difficult for scientists to accommodate knowledge that is grounded in subjective experience, or contextual knowledge of place (Wallace, 2000). Being able to recognize these ideas as assumptions, not givens, allows one the room to "let go"--at least temporarily--of entrenched assumptions. This awareness is vital to the practice of CCE.

The work of Nisbett, Peng, Choi, and Norenzayan (2001) argues that social organization filters perception of experience, which influences one's worldview. Worldview, in turn, guides epistemology--what is important to know and how knowledge can be obtained. Because worldview represents the foundational level of a culture, it also represents the ultimate source of cultural diversity (Figure 1). It provides grounding for epistemologies used to construct knowledge (western/scientific methods, Chinese medical theory, Indigenous knowledge systems). Figure 1 illustrates progressively deeper yet more powerful aspects of culture.

Figure 1.
Progressively Deeper Yet More Powerful Aspects of Culture
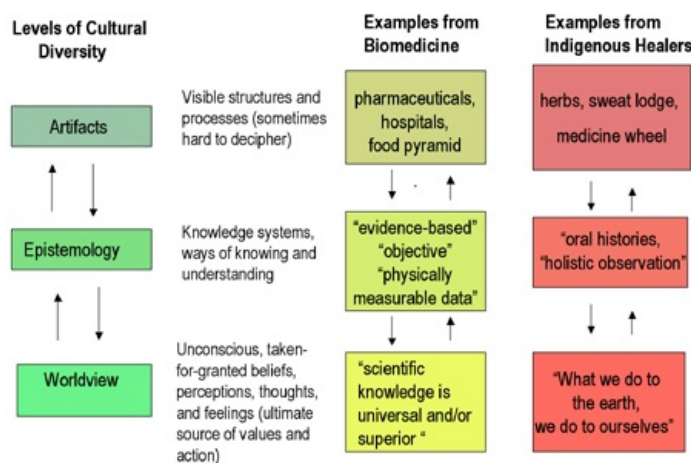
Adapted from Schein, *Organizational culture and leadership*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1992, pp15-20.

CCE Brings Multiple Worldviews

A key feature of CCE is that it brings multiple worldviews together around a problem or issue. CCE helps us as Extension professionals to acknowledge the diversity of metaphysical orientations and worldviews existing within communities. This diversity helps us to recognize as cultural constructions the worldviews foundational to scientific thinking as well. By bringing to the table alternative worldviews, CCE helps to expose materialistic worldviews that:

- See humankind as entitled to dominion over nature.
- Value control and manipulation of the natural world for human benefit.
- See a world that is stable and predictable.
- Study objects in isolation from context.
- Focus on the physical world and measurable parameters.
- Value abstract scientific knowledge as objective, universal, or superior.
- See contradiction as a problem to be reconciled.

CCE brings contrasting East Asian worldviews that:

- See humankind as being in harmony with--a microcosm of--nature.
- Value appropriate adaptation to an ever-changing world.
- See a world that is in constant flux, fluid and subjective.
- Study objects within a context and relationship to other things.
- Value sensory perception and subjective experience.
- Value knowledge gained by pragmatic experience.
- See contradiction and paradox as being continuously created.

CCE also brings indigenous worldviews that:

- See humankind as "pathetic two-leggeds" with obligations to nature.
- Value respect for and protection of a living natural world.
- See a world that is spiritual, cyclical, and patterned yet uncontrollable.
- Study the interrelatedness of all natural things.
- Value learning by doing.
- Value lived experience, oral traditions, and wisdom embedded in spirituality.
- See contradiction as mysteries to be embraced, not resolved.

Academic professionals may be unaware of the metaphysical ideology lying beneath western/scientific approaches. Scientists investigating other cultures frequently inspect tangible objects (artifacts) using scientific methods, but usually dismiss underlying epistemologies such as Yin/Yang theory, Qi, and Indigenous knowledge (Leslie & Young, 1992; Semali & Kincheloe, 1999). Preoccupation with a western/scientific perspective offers no place for epistemologies incongruent with a materialistic worldview, excluding potentially useful ideas (Hassel, Hafner, Soberg, Adelmann, & Haywood, 2002). One outcome of successful CCE practice is to recognize that diversity of worldview and epistemology is a valuable resource for innovation and should be preserved, not discarded.

The Craft of CCE

CCE practice represents broader, more inclusive work for Extension professionals. Its currencies are relationship and trust with communities over time. Trust and relationships, in turn, are built upon a sincere and demonstrated willingness to:

- Recognize and call into question one's own ideology without becoming defensive.

- Be able to shift roles "from expert to acolyte" (Simpson & Driben, 2000).

- Step into and listen, learn and reason within an entirely different worldview.

- Suspend impulses to control program agendas and decisions.

- Create an environment that facilitates sharing knowledge and navigating the many different forms of expertise within communities and the academy.

The craft of CCE is more about working with partners on a journey of learning and change than following a preconceived research design or blueprint for action. Extension professionals need to be willing to adapt their academic agendas to the open-ended, unpredictable processes of CCE.

Examine Ideas About Science

The craft of CCE first asks academic professionals to be aware of that which we tend to take for granted. CCE challenges us to critically examine the worldview assumptions and scientific ideology that we bring to our work (Hassel, 2004). CCE does not question the success of western science. But it does challenge some ideas about science, like the notion that "science provides the only credible view of the world," or "science provides our only source of genuine knowledge about the world." These notions do not represent scientific knowledge *per se*, because they are not the result of scientific experiments (Wallace, 2000). Rather, they are *a priori* assertions or beliefs about the superiority or universality of science.

Challenge to tightly held assumptions disguised as reality can be destabilizing to one's cognitive world, creating anxiety and fear (Schein, 1992). CCE requires the intellectual humility needed to critically examine embedded assumptions and to accommodate other ways of understanding the world. To summarize, CCE first asks us to:

- Make explicit the entrenched, basic assumptions embedded within scientific thinking, and
- Expose these ideas to rigorous critical scrutiny (Paul, 1993).

Assimilation or Pluralism?

Second, CCE brings diverse worldviews to the table, offering a rich source of alternative knowledge, ideas, and practices for consideration. The craft of CCE asks academic professionals to consider alternative knowledge *from within the worldview of its origin*. This statement implies that merely learning *about* different worldviews from a familiar frame of reference is insufficient. CCE asks academic professionals to actively shift their own perspectives in order to experience learning and thinking from *within* the worldview being explored.

This means "trying on" the assumptions and values of another worldview for the purpose of reasoning within a different knowledge system. The metaphor of "walking in another's shoes" is relevant to pluralistic thinking skills. Time, critical reflection, and substantive, ongoing relationships with non-academic communities are required to gain these skills.

CCE discourages the reflexive instinct to automatically impose scientific evaluation criteria upon any knowledge that is accessed (Hassel, 2004). To do so presumes either superiority of western/scientific epistemologies or coherence between the materialistic worldviews of western science and other worldviews. It is crucial not to distort diverse ways of knowing by forcing them to conform to epistemologies of Western science (Aikenhead, 1997).

From a community-based perspective, science often appropriates cultural artifacts (acupuncture, herbs, wild rice) that achieve scientific standards of "evidence" while discarding epistemologies (Qi, Yin/Yang theory, Indigenous knowledge) that are incoherent with scientific understandings (Hassel et al., 2002; Hassel, 2004). Accordingly, scientific advancement is often seen to leave a wake of destruction upon the philosophical underpinnings of other knowledge systems (Fruehauf, 1999; Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999; Scheid, 1999).

An excellent example is institutional policies regarding intellectual property that do not recognize or give protection to knowledge of oral traditions. These consequences may be invisible to academic professionals unskilled in reasoning within another knowledge system. Destructive consequences may be avoided through action research in which decision-making lies with community-based partners (Hassel et al., 2002). Such consequences can be minimized if all participants are engaged in examining presumptions and come to consensus on whether scientific criteria are appropriate. The craft of CCE also asks us to:

- Think critically and fair-mindedly, and reason empathetically *within* a knowledge system using its own worldview and basic assumptions.

- Avoid imposing the ideology and criteria of one perspective (i.e., western science) upon another without critical examination, explicit rationale, and consensus of CCE partners.

- Become aware of destructive tendencies of scientific advancement from the perspective of other knowledge systems.

Issues of Power and Control

Third, the craft of CCE works best when programmatic leadership and ownership lie with community-based partners. This point gets to issues of trust, power, and control, including prevailing cultural norms, values, and power dynamics of large land-grant universities. CCE participants may distrust these cultural norms, because they can be damaging to knowledge systems not corresponding to western/scientific perspectives (Fruehauf, 1999; Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999; Hafner, Hassel, Soberg, Adelmann, & Fetch, 2004; Hassel, 2004).

Community-based leadership allows CCE participants to define problems and set agendas according to their perspectives and priorities. Community-based leadership can also facilitate for Extension faculty the role shift from content expert to that of co-learner (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Simpson & Driben, 2000). Extension professionals can then engage in the work of listening and empathetically experiencing other worldviews and ways of knowing. If undertaken sincerely, these actions facilitate building trust and developing long-term relationships.

CCE asks that:

- Programmatic leadership and ownership reside with community-based partners.

- Academic professionals become active co-learners, adapting their academic agendas accordingly.

Discussion

Engaging across cultures is not new to Extension. The late Erl Bates, once Advisor on Indian Extension, Cornell University, reported the following (1949):

> The fundamental idea behind the Indian extension program is to build on the best of their ancient civilization and to add those things in ours which will enable them to live better.

The craft of CCE as described here, asks us to think carefully about:

- From what perspective is "the best of ancient civilization" defined?
- From what perspective is "living better" defined?

Pursued from different worldviews and epistemologies, judgments about what constitutes "the best of ancient civilization" or "living better" will clearly yield differences. CCE advocates a shift in thinking from a one-way process of assimilation into a dominant western/scientific perspective toward a two-way process of engaging multiple worldviews, each producing its own truths. In

considering the questions above, CCE asks academic professionals to loosen ties to academic fundamentalism--the refusal of the academy to value any truth that does not conform to its own professional standards (Gerber, 1997).

The rush to impose "solutions" derived exclusively through a western/scientific perspective can reflect a process of "colonizing" as eloquently discussed by Tuhiwai-Smith (1999). The first priority of academic work according to the craft of CCE is that it increases the potential or capacity of a community to live well as defined by the community itself. Academic concerns of creating "valid" knowledge from a scientific perspective are subordinated to the first priority of creating benefit for the community (Maxwell, 1984).

In addition to understanding the dispositions and applying the principles described above, the craft of CCE is facilitated through:

- Honesty with ourselves in understanding and stating our reasons for engaging in this kind of work. For what and whom are the results useful? Whose interests are being served?

- Patient and careful listening. Building trust and developing long-term relationships requires commitment and perseverance over time.

- Presenting oneself as a whole person, not just a professional. The idea of separate personal and professional selves is an anomaly within many worldviews.

- Putting all agendas on the table. Openness and full disclosure demonstrated over time is respected.

Extension professionals skilled in CCE can bring cultural diversity, breadth of perspective, and innovation to the core of the academic enterprise at land-grant research universities. In so doing, we can help the land-grant university serve as a resource through which to access, network, exchange, and navigate the many different forms of expertise within academic and non-academic communities.

Acknowledgements

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