Applied Cultural Semiotics and Intercultural Training

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Cultural diversity and globalization are challenging professionals and public service organizations to deliver culturally appropriate services to their stakeholder groups and communities. However, reviews of existing approaches to cross-cultural/intercultural training signal the continuing absence of reliable data for defining and measuring proposed learning objectives (Dinges 1983, Gibson, Zhong 2005, Welzel et al. 2003). This gap in the literature is especially prevalent regarding evaluation of «achieved learning outcomes» (Crandall et al. 2003: 588-89). In response to this interdisciplinary need, the West Montreal Readaptation Center (WMRC) in Canada undertook a study in March, 2009 entitled *Integrating Culture into Service Delivery for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities*. This project aims at contributing to the development of interdisciplinary materials and processes for evaluating the short and medium term outcomes of a semiotic-based approach to intercultural training in a professional as opposed to an academic context. This first of a series of texts on the WMRC initiative outlines the theoretical and methodological assumptions of the project. At this preliminary stage of development, the study is not primarily geared to the production of knowledge but to the utility of the process and product under evaluation. Discussion will firstly center on the relevance of the project from health and social services and WMRC perspectives. Description of the semiotic component will lead into the second part of the study which provides a methodological overview of the training and evaluative design. This overview links the semiotic-based approach to emerging models in cross-cultural education and their application to a professional training scenario within an organizational setting. Evaluation of the workshop results will focus on the short term quantitative outcomes of the initiative. The qualitative analysis of complementary information on the base-line perceptions of the participants with respect to their culture-specific contexts is also presented.

I. RELEVANCE OF THE PROJECT:

I.1. The Social Sciences Perspective

Cultural differences impact on how individuals and groups access and use health and social services (O'Hara 2003). These differences can present barriers to providing culturally sensitive partnerships with stakeholder groups (Summers, Jones 2004). A lack of culturally responsive and responsible services may result in professionals stereotyping, misinterpreting or otherwise mishandling encounters with individuals and groups viewed as different in terms of background and experience (Vazquez-Nutall, Li, Kaplan 2006). While it is widely accepted that Canada's health and social services system must accommodate culture differences (Oxman-Martinez, Hanley 2005), existing research and knowledge bases to this effect are limited concerning culturally responsive service delivery to individuals with intellectual disabilities.

I.2. The WMRC Perspective

West Montreal Readaptation Centre (WMRC) is a public service establishment that provides a wide range of specialized services for individuals with an intellectual disability or an autism spectrum disorder. The visible ethnic diversity amongst professionals, caregivers, users, and their families at the center suggests that issues related to culture will become increasingly

important to all aspects of professional activities. As the host institution for the project, WMRC aims firstly at investigating how emerging, multi-leveled models of intercultural training, such as that of «cultural intelligence» (Earley, Peterson 2004), can impact on professionals working in the field of intellectual disabilities. Secondly, the project will analyze the culture-related issues and concerns faced by professionals (human relations agents) and caregivers who support individuals with disabilities in WMRC residential settings. Based on this information, the study will seek to identify key barriers which limit the capacity of WMRC professionals for integrating culture into their day-to-day practices and subsequently, to explore solutions for resolving issues faced in service-delivery. Overall, the praxis-based thrust of these three proposed WMRC objectives provide the applied research initiative with a dominant intercultural focus. Whereas multiculturalism encompasses the broader issues of a culturally diversified society, the concept of interculturality represents a more specialized educational term that evokes optimal learning environments for fostering improved intercultural communication (Lasonen 2005: 56). The shift towards interculturality signals growing emphasis on praxis-based, professional training methods that can be defined and evaluated in terms of outcomes that relate to knowhow as well as knowledge. The WMRC research project mirrors this shift and targets the trainees' capacity for innovative problem-solving in meeting specific cultural needs rather than simply complying to pre-defined cultural norms which, in turn, risks «reducing the individual to his/her cultural membership» (Abdallah-Pretceil 2006: 476).

I.3. The Semiotic Perspective

At the core of this capacity for intercultural performance targeted by WMRC lie complex issues regarding the interpretation of cultural meaning. Defining semiotics very broadly as the science of signs, communication and meaning (Nöth 1995: 3), it can be argued that this ongoing process of negotiated collective meaning inherent to intercultural performance constitutes a semiotic fact. This assumption suggests the little explored potential of semiotics, and especially cultural semiotics, for designing and implementing training models in intercultural education. This hypothesis finds itself further reinforced by semiotics' capacity for developing perceptive, cognitive and meta-cognitive faculties conducive to intercultural communication (Baur, Grzybeck 1989, Cunningham 1986). Furthermore, applied research in the discipline has given rise to findings that merge with those in other fields with respect to the phenomenological study of culture (Lang 1997: 391) as negotiated meaning and exchange (Barley 1983, Appadurai 1986, Grieves 2000, Ferguson 1988). A semiotic-based training model could consequently answer the recognized need in intercultural education for a common theoretical framework to work with culture (Bhawuk 1998, Black, Mendenhall 1990).

II. METHODOLOGY

II.1. Presentation of the Project and Semiotic Design of the Training

The first phase of the project began in March, 2009. Approximately twenty human relations agents and residential managers from WMRC received eighteen hours of semiotic training

over three days[1]. The in-service training format was adapted from course content and learning strategies designed for a thirty-six hour undergraduate course. Transfer of this academic model to an eighteen hour field training situation had been previously piloted in France and Australia through a 2007 research project entitled «Tools for Cultural Development». Although the culture-specific needs and issues addressed in this preceding study differed from the WMRC initiative, training in both contexts applied the same training design. This design twinned the poststructuralist semiotics of the Tartu School (Ivanov et al. 1974) with Peirce's phenomenological semiotics (Fisch 1986). In light of the paradigm shift towards interculturality, this semiotic approach targeted the capacity of individuals for innovative culture-specific problem solving through a specific form of performance: exchange. Defining as a meta-narrative and performative act (Greimas, Courtés 1979: 114), it was further assumed that this narrative format could be used to articulate and communicate scenarios for innovation in a training situation. This assumption further reflected the increasing attention paid to the creative potential of semiotics (Hénault 2002, Rudowicz 2003, Taborsky 2004). These converging principles from the three above-mentioned schools of semiotic theory merged into a common model that provided the three core modules of the course: culture as system, culture as communication, culture as signification and exchange. These modules corresponded closely to those of multi-levelled approaches to intercultural training, such as that of «cultural intelligence» (Earley, Peterson 2004, Thomas, Inkson 2004), as well as to major definitions of performance, as outlined in Carlson's analysis of the field (1996).

Table 1

Semiotics, Performance Studies, Multi-Levelled Intercultural Training

SEMIOTIC-BASED COURSE: core modules	PERFORMANCE	CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE
Culture as system	Building communities	Mindfulness /cognitive mapping
Culture as communication	Presentation of self in everyday life	Social communication
Culture as creativity	Virtuosity	Specialized behaviour

The core modules were then expanded to include an introductory and concluding frame. The first module subdivided to include an initial module entitled «Culture as Identity», based on the Palo Alto model of communication and its view of meta-communication (Watzlawick et al. 1972: 84-88). The concluding module on exchange also deconstructed into two parts. The first, now module four, explored the cultural nature of creativity as described Csikszentmihalyi in cognitive psychology (Feldman et al. 1994) and led into the final module on exchange.

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[1] Co-investigator Dr. Roger Parent delivered the professional training at WMRC as well as in the above mentioned pilot study in Australia and France.

TABLE 2

FIVE MODULE STRUCTURE OF THE SEMIOTIC-BASED MODEL FOR INTERCULTURAL TRAINING

Module 1	Module 2	Module 3	Module 4	Module 5
Culture as identity	Culture as system	Culture as communication	Culture as creativity	Culture as exchange

This five-part semiotic-based course design then served as a basis for the subsequent definition of content, goals and processes that could be integrated (culture-general / culture-specific), learner centered, and multi-dimensional (meta-cognitive, cognitive, affective, behavioural).

TABLE 3

COURSE MODULES AND THE MULTI-LEVELLED MODEL TO INTERCULTURAL TRAINING

COURSE MODULES	INTEGRATED CONTENT	GOALS	LEARNING
Culture as identity	Culture-specific: institution/ philosophy	Experiential	Meta-cognitive (self-awareness)
Culture as system (culture-awareness)	Culture general: course/ curriculum	Academic	Meta-cognitive & cognitive (culture-awareness)
Culture as communication	Culture-specific	Experiential	Cognitive & Affective
Culture as creativity	Learner-centered	Life-long learning	Cognitive & Affective
Culture as exchange	Community/partnerships	Life-long learning	Behavioral

Learning strategies within this flexible and adaptable structure focused on accommodating cognitive, experiential, self-awareness and culture-awareness approaches to intercultural training within a semiotic framework so as to deliver a learning experience that could integrate «the so-called 'ivory tower' academic approach with 'real life' situations» (Milhouse 1996: 72-73). Workshop design was based on Bennett's (1986) typology of intercultural training models:

1. intellectual or university model.

2. area training or simulation model.

3. self-awareness or human relations model.

4. cultural awareness model.

Peirce's phenomenological semiotics provided the grounding for a learner-centered orientation and incorporation of the «self-awareness model». Cultural semiotics became the framework for the cultural awareness component.

II.2. Design of the quantitative evaluation of the training

The design for evaluation of training outcomes resembled that of other intercultural models (Hughes, Hood 2007: 59, Gibson, Zhong 2005: 625-626). Statistical analysis centered on a nucleus of main outcomes which, in turn, deconstructed into a repertoire of primary and secondary techniques. In the academic version of the course, this process established a competence scale of twenty-six training skills. At WMRC, as in the preceding French and Australian study, transitioning from a university to an eighteen hour professional in-service training situation focused evaluation by participants on approximately one half of those performance objectives. The thirteen questions targeted in the pre-post workshop surveys from within the twenty-six point competency scale in the academic course comprised four major outcomes, six core skills and three specific skills. These surveys provided the basis for the quantitative evaluation of the in-service training on a short term basis.

II.3. Participants

Twelve voluntary participants completed the pre-post surveys. Trainees were human relations agents from WMRC adult and family services. In the pre-course survey, they answered the thirteen questions that pertained directly to skills targeted by the training session. Immediately after the workshop, they then answered the full twenty-six point post survey used for the academic version of the course. Of this number, only the thirteen questions corresponding to the pre-course survey were retained for evaluation. The duration of both surveys combined was approximately ninety minutes, including preliminary explanations and related ethics procedures. Some participants also took part in an interview prior to the first workshop session. One group was comprised of 5 participants and the other of 3.

II.4. Data collection procedures and instruments

The evaluation process sought to determine the degree to which the participants perceived themselves as having benefited directly from the training. Standards for comparison where established by using the pre-course survey as a baseline to measure changes in attitudes. The survey forms examined each key skill in terms of three indicators: knowledge, experience and confidence. These indicators provided a scale that ranged from low to high, from 1 to 5, by which participants could rate their perceived level of skill description. Independent T-tests were used to analyse results. Significance was based on $p<.05$. With respect to the preliminary qualitative data, group interviews conducted prior to the training comprised an interview scheme of open ended questions. Participants' answers have been recorded and transcribed.

II.5. Data analysis

Two items from the pre-post surveys were retrieved for methodological considerations owing to their wording. Quantitative evaluation of the training subsequently looked at how the training was perceived by participants to have impacted on the three outcomes for each of the eleven skills (for a total of 33 comparisons). T-test results indicate that twenty-two of these measures across ten of the eleven skills were statistically significant with respect to at least one learning indicator (table 4). These acquisitions cover the complete range of learning objectives proposed through the training process in terms of main outcomes, core skills and key skills. The

open questions interviews were analyzed using a classic content analysis method (L'Écuyer 1990). After reading the transcripts, a coding grid was developed and applied to the material. The article presents the classification of main themes which constitutes a preliminary data analysis.

III. RESULTS

Preliminary analysis of quantitative data at WMRC subsequently focuses on improvement of skill level as perceived by participants regarding eleven target competencies. These eleven skills comprise the three previously mentioned learning indicators: knowledge, experience and confidence. Based on changes in the survey results before and after the workshop, participants rated higher, with respect to all three indicators, those items pertaining to intercultural problem solving, meta-communication and cultural analysis. Scoring by trainees also indicated perceived improvement of skill level in relation to two or one indicators with respect to seven target skills. These seven outcomes pertain to cultural analysis, recognition of cultural signs and more appropriate interpretation of cultural meaning through relation of the function of the sign to its cultural system. Attitudinal change regarding the participants' perceived capacity for improved intercultural communication seems also present in comparison to pre-post survey ratings on the use of cultural interpreters in establishing collaborative networks within a target cultural environment and in responding to specific collective needs through innovative action.

As preliminary results, emerging themes from the group interviews prior to training were regrouped under three main categories: (1) indicators of cultural differences, (2) factors affecting the role and management of cultural differences, (3) dilemmas and issues of daily practice. When asked if they encountered any cultural issues in the intervention, participants essentially talked about attitudes and behaviours related to paid caregivers from minority ethno-cultural backgrounds. Cultural differences were seen in their food choices, decoration of the house, customs at home, ways they celebrated (or not) birthdays and other special events (community and religion-linked celebrations). Participants also discussed the need for caregivers to follow WMRC procedures and policies, as well as broader orientations according to rights of people with intellectual disabilities. Perceived factors affecting the role and management of cultural differences referred to communication issues, the ethno-cultural background of caregivers and to individual characteristics (personal style, adaptability to change). Gaps between knowledge of each other's culture and expectations of compliance to WMRC rules, values and policies were also mentioned. Finally, perceived dilemmas and issues found in daily practices referred to the hierarchy of rights, the importance of a fit/match between the clients' characteristics and the paid caregivers' ones as well as the possible misinterpretation and erroneous judgement between WMCR and paid caregivers because of communication pitfalls.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

With respect to the quantitative results, responses by trainees to the learning indicators suggest that learning occurred on both cognitive and affective levels. The three target skills where all learning indicators registered as statistically significant correspond to the three core modules of the semiotic training design: culture, intercultural communication and creativity (problem-solving). And perceived attitudinal change by participants in the remaining intercultural skills all relate to processes for understanding culture through interpretation of its signs. As previously mentioned, these processes and materials, in their present stage of development, target demonstration of the utility of the process and product under examination.

Table 4

Overview of possible learning acquistion and knowledge transfer

(*Independent t-tests, statistical significance based on p < .05. Sample size: 12*).

Skill	Knowledge	Experience	Confidence
Successful communicate my project to meet a cultural need to key people in the culture.		x	x
Bring about needed changes in a culture.	x	x	x
Design and implement projects capable of answering a specific cultural need.	x		
Recognize signs of cultural identity.	x		x
Communicate respect for a person's cultural identity.	x	x	x
Identify a culture's actions (strategies and objectives) to survive.	x	x	x
Establish relationships between the cultural signs observed in a culture and the function or role they fulfill in the cultural system.		x	x
Collaborate with a cultural interpreter in gaining access to privileged information within the culture.	x		x
Determine some of the rules, often unwritten, that determine how people in the culture communicate.	x		
Understand how exchange contributes to the evolution of cultural systems.	x		
I can formulate a personal hypothesis as to my target culture's main belief systems (its way of defining what is «possible» and «impossible).		x	x

The small sample size limits what can be generalized but provides a basis for follow-up studies by the research team. These studies will document and analyze the outcomes of the WMRC initiative over six months. The identification of skills where cognitive and affective learning was perceived to have occurred establish a frame of reference for subsequent comparison of how these practices possibly translate into culture-specific behavioral outcomes. In addition, the base-line perceptions documented in the qualitative data will facilitate comparison of how such outcomes relate to the needs and concerns expressed regarding delivery of culturally appropriate services.

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