

Developing Intercultural Competence

Nicolas Sola and James Wilkinson, Thames Valley University

Abstract

In a world in which national boundaries are being eroded and where cultural diversity is experienced within nations as much as between them, the ability to manage and to work in multicultural teams is becoming ever more important. The Erasmus / Socrates funded IICEE project (Interpersonal and Intercultural Competence for the Enlarged Europe) has developed a module to prepare people for work and leadership in such a world. In seeking to develop intercultural competence, an approach is needed which, on the one hand, develops awareness of relevant concepts and on the other, equips learners with practical skills which enable them to manage and work in multicultural teams. Accordingly, the IICEE module is structured around three learning units: interpersonal and intercultural communication, teamwork and presentation skills; creative problem solving strategies; and cross-cultural project management and team facilitation. A collaboration of partners from 12 different European countries, the IICEE project is itself a case study in cross-cultural management, and besides outlining the content of the IICEE module, this paper also describes the IICEE project experience and how it has contributed to the design of the module. The paper also reports on the experience of delivering ICBE (Intercultural Communication for the Business Environment), a Masters level module offered at Thames Valley University which is essentially the same as IICEE but without the European focus, thus allowing a more global application. Finally, the paper concludes with reference to new work that may provide a suitable framework for the many disparate elements and apparent contradictions inherent in many conceptions of intercultural competence. These include basic questions concerning intercultural competence: its goal, scope, application and theoretical underpinning.

Keywords: intercultural competence / communication / teamwork / project management; creative problem solving.

Introduction

In a world in which national boundaries are being eroded and where cultural diversity is experienced within nations as much as between them, the relevance of intercultural competence for education policy is beyond question (Bolten 2007). At an individual level, people need to acquire and develop interpersonal and intercultural skills to enable them to work and provide leadership in multicultural project teams. And for organisations, the ability to understand, manage and draw benefits from cultural diversity has become an essential asset. However, trying to develop intercultural competence in the classroom can be likened to teaching people to swim lying on the floor, and the problem is not only to do with the need to demonstrate such competence in real life. The challenge with intercultural competence also lies in achieving the necessary synergetic interplay of multiple subcomponents of cognitive, affective and conative competences (Bolten 2007). Courses therefore need to be “experiential, conceptual, practical, prospective and imaginative” (Schneider and Barsoux 2003: 258, citing De Bettignies).

A team of European colleagues has designed the IICEE module (Interpersonal and Intercultural Competence for the Enlarged Europe) which seeks to develop such integrated competences. With funding support from the European Commission, the IICEE project has produced a module with accompanying teaching and learning materials, and made these available via the IICEE website <http://iicee.tvu.ac.uk>. The project was coordinated by Thames Valley University, London, in collaboration with partners from Germany, Spain, France, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Slovenia and the Slovak Republic (Heilbronn University; Steinbeis Transfer Center; University of Applied Science Nordhausen, Oviedo University; Institut de Préparation à l'Administration et à la Gestion (IPAG) Nice; University of Genoa; Hogeschool Windesheim; Pirkanmaa Polytechnic; Vytautas Magna University, Kaunas; Budapest Business School; Gdansk University; Ljubljana University; and Zilina University)

By its very nature, the two year IICEE project has been an example of precisely those issues with which it is itself concerned, namely a deeply interpersonal and intercultural venture involving individuals and partner organisations from twelve different countries in a complex, multidisciplinary project. Much of the design of the IICEE module has been shaped by this experience. This paper first describes the module and the pedagogical materials that have been produced by the IICEE project, including aims and learning outcomes, together with a brief overview of the key theoretical concepts which underpin the module's three learning units. It then presents the IICEE project as an example of many of those concepts in practice and provides an

evaluation of the project and of the experience of delivering the module for the first time. Finally, the paper outlines the team's ongoing efforts to find a satisfactory and coherent theoretical framework, for the many disparate elements and apparent contradictions which exist in current conceptions of intercultural competence.

The IICEE Module: Teaching, Learning and Assessment

The IICEE module was designed in accordance with teaching, learning and assessment strategies currently practised by the project partner institutions. Accordingly, a module study guide provides full information, including details of the learning experience, learning resources, and assessment. This can be downloaded from the IICEE website (<http://iicee.tvu.ac.uk>). In addition to the guide, learners are supported with a learning pack for each of the module's three learning units (see 2.3 below). These have been drafted and are being edited with a view to publication as a book. The packs provide theoretical underpinning for each learning unit, as well as practical exercises and tasks, including case studies, simulations and group assignments. These are designed to test learners' knowledge and understanding of the concepts taught, and to enable them to transfer and apply their understanding to real-life situations.

The IICEE module seeks to develop three dimensions of learning by a variety of approaches:

- The cognitive or “thinking” dimension, which involves, on the one hand, learning and understanding concepts and theories and on the other, using this understanding to reflect critically on lived experience.
- The affective or “emotional” dimension includes emotional aspects that guide human response to external stimuli and encourage interpersonal and relational skills in all areas, so that the classroom becomes
- “the place where there is not only cognitive but also affective challenge — and the opportunity to reflect on one's response.” (Byram et al, 2004)
- The conative or “doing” dimension is motivated and driven by the human disposition for action. This component has close affinities with experiential learning, action learning and leads to the acquisition of hands-on experience.

Critical incidents and case studies allow learners to develop a range of capabilities and competencies (e.g. analytical, linguistic, methodical), and a group project lasting for most of the duration of the module gives them actual experience of multicultural teamwork. Delivery also includes:

- independent intensive learning such as student-centred bibliographical research and data collection
- guided self-tuition
- technology-enhanced learning
- student presentations
- reflection phase including group and self-evaluation

The module has been designed to blend traditional teaching formats (lectures, scripts) with innovative forms of learning such as interactive e-learning platforms and virtual project weeks. In addition, students are able to integrate their own work experience and learn from the experience of working on both team and individual assignments.

10 ECTS credits are awarded for this module, and these are achieved as follows:

- 3 ECTS credits for each of the three learning units, plus
- 1 credit for completion of a large case study which integrates the learning from all three learning units

Module Aims

The IICEE module aims to enable existing and future managers to pursue their interactive goals in a culturally diverse environment and to equip them with relevant skills. It aims specifically:

1. to equip learners with the necessary knowledge, capabilities and skills, drawn from a range of academic disciplines and vocational backgrounds, to work and provide leadership in cross-cultural management contexts;
2. to introduce learners to the major principles, strategies and tools of “cross-cultural management”;
3. to provide current and future practitioners with an internationally respected cross-cultural expertise and to broaden learners’ awareness of the European dimension by consciously focusing on perspectives provided by the new member states;
4. to enhance learners’ employability and job performance in the European and global labour market.

Module Learning Outcomes

On completing the IICEE module, learners will be able to

1. provide an overview of the expertise available in three knowledge areas covered by the following three learning units:
 - a. interpersonal and intercultural communication, teamwork and presentation skills
 - b. creative problem solving strategies
 - c. cross-cultural project management and team facilitation;
2. appreciate intercultural management as an inter-related system in which a number of interdisciplinary tasks are coordinated and aligned with overall strategies;
3. exercise the interpersonal, intercultural and problem solving skills required in international management;
4. value cultural diversity as an asset and draw benefits from it.

Learning Unit 1: Interpersonal and intercultural communication, teamwork and presentation skills

Students learn key concepts described in the relevant literature. This includes cultural dimensions, orientations towards time, context, value dimensions, interpretations of meanings, as well as theories of communication and intercultural competence, and coherence-based versus cohesion-based conceptions of culture. This conceptual framework is based on the work of, among others, the following authors and organisations:

Bolten (2003), Gesteland (2002), the GLOBE Project (2005), Gudykunst (2003 and 2005), Hall (1997), Hofstede (1980 and 2004), Rathje (2007), Ting-Toomey (2005) and Trompenaars and Hampden Turner (1997).

The learner is encouraged to adopt a critical stance and to avoid relying too heavily on specific models, or using them in isolation. Over-emphasis on cultural dimensions to explain behaviour can, for example, produce outcomes which are actually quite the opposite of what is intended, in that learners develop even more pronounced – albeit more sophisticated – stereotypical views of other cultures than they had to start with. In addition to the above cognitive learning, students learn to manage the affective and behavioural aspects that arise in cross-cultural interactions. These include overcoming prejudices, managing emotional reactions and creating a positive atmosphere of tolerance, understanding and acceptance.

Learning Unit 2: Creative problem solving strategies

The main aim of Learning Unit 2 is to provide learners with a solid grounding in the area of creative problem solving strategies. Students acquire an understanding of the importance of innovation and creativity in a company’s process of change in both reactive and pro-active ways. They also develop the ability to establish, in interculturally diverse environments, creativity and innovation based on an understanding of the prerequisite conditions. Students also acquire the theoretical understanding and the ability to apply creative problem solving-techniques and to choose the right management problem solving tool for a specific situation.

Finally, the learner acquires a knowledge and understanding of conflict resolution strategies, needed to bring consensus in negotiation, and of problem solving strategies so that they can transform ideas into realisation. Delivery of the unit is in four parts, covering a historical overview of strategic management methods, creativity techniques, and a creative problem solving 'road map'. Finally, the impact of culture and intercultural issues on problem solving strategies is considered.

Amongst others, the work of the following authors is examined:

Buzan, (2006), de Bono (1992), Dörner (1996), Doppler and Lauterberg (2000), Goleman et al (1993), Hammer and Champy (2001), Kaplan and Norton (1999), Perkins (2000).

Learning Unit 3: Cross-cultural project management and team facilitation

In this unit students gain an understanding of the evolution of the major tools and approaches currently used in project management and the role of professional PM organisations. It is also important that learners can explain and apply the fundamental principles of project management and the structure of project-based organisations, and that they comprehend the features that distinguish projects from other organisational undertakings. Students must also be aware of the typical project constraints and those relevant for multi-cultural projects, and comprehend the concept of the project lifecycle. They also develop an appreciation of project management as an inter-related system in which a number of interdisciplinary tasks are coordinated and aligned with overall corporate strategies, and understand which competencies (interpersonal, intercultural, managerial or methodical) are required to manage projects successfully. Learners further acquire an understanding of the specific nature and implications of cross-cultural project management and how to benefit from culturally diverse teams and create a corporate learning atmosphere conducive to cultural adaptation. Finally, students learn to visualise the process of project management and to present its results. They also reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of their own management techniques.

Core texts for project management and intercultural / international management include the following:

Project Management:

Burke (2003), Harvard Business Essentials (2004), Keeling, R. (2000), Kozak-Holland (2004), Newbold (1998), Project Management Institute (2004), Turner (1993).

Intercultural / International Management:

Bennett (1998), Boud (1995), Cushner and Brislin (1995), Deresky (2006), Fowler, (1995), Griffin and Pustay (2005), Landis (2004), Lustig, and Koester (2006), Puffer (1996), Schneider and Barsoux, (2002), Soderberg and Holden (2002), Trompenaars and Woolliams (2003).

At the same time as engaging with the theoretical input from the above learning units, students apply, practise and reflect on what they are learning in a multicultural group project.

The IICEE Project Experience – an example of interpersonal and intercultural project work

With fourteen institutional partners from twelve different countries, the IICEE Project represents a valuable case study in cross-cultural management, and the experience of undertaking the project has itself been a major influence on the design of the IICEE module. In particular, the project had to manage numerous constraints.

Meier (2004, 60) cites key issues and constraints concerning such collaboration:

- “cultural barriers (... , differences in attitudes and social values...)
- differences in specialist and everyday verbal language and non-verbal forms of expression
- considerable distances between project partners and resulting time zones
- on account of this, project meetings take place less often
- differing perceived value and acceptance of IT supported communication and collaboration
- acceptance of the project partners both internally and externally due to their differing importance (because of their differing relative social status) ...”
- (translated from the original)

Sohmen and Levin (2001) point to further problems concerning communications in multicultural project teams, where different assumptions about the same issues can cause “dissonance in perceptions”, and where equivalent words in different languages can have different nuances or connotations. A further challenge was to practise the principle of “valuing diversity and promoting inclusivity”, as advocated by the Staff and Educational Development Association, (cited by Greaves *et al*, 2004). Achieving such inclusivity meant finding ways of ensuring that each partner felt involved in decision making, without meetings turning into unproductive talking shops. From the start, the project team attempted to ‘walk the talk’ inherent in the project’s own aims and objectives and adopted a range of strategies in line with the same integrated project management and intercultural competences upon which the IICEE module is based. Moreover, this experience also shaped the structuring of the module, so that students likewise undertake a group project and critically reflect upon it (see Section 4 below).

The IICEE Project Mission	
Sponsors	European community; 14 participating universities
Purpose	A balanced East-West partnership which brings together a team of HE specialists from the UK, Germany, Spain, the Netherlands, France, Finland, Italy, Poland, Lithuania, Slovenia, Slovakia and Hungary to produce a module designed to enable the target groups to pursue their interaction goals in a culturally diverse environment.
Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to broaden the European dimension by focusing on CEE perspectives • to develop hands-on management and intercultural communication skills • to enable people to appreciate cultural diversity and draw benefits from it • to enhance students' employability and job performance
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to produce a module according to the specified goals • to deliver this module in all participating institutions • to make the module available to other organisations • to set up a website to facilitate information dissemination • to make all materials generally available
Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • interdisciplinary team venture with clearly allocated individual and group tasks • work groups and plenary meetings to discuss procedural and content-based issues, • continuous progress logging and documentation • news-groups and electronic linking up of all team members

All plenary meetings were directed by an experienced facilitator, who was not the same person as the project coordinator, and minutes were prepared along with action plans, identifying responsibilities and deadlines. The project progressed via a series of phases comprising project initiation, design, implementation and close-out.

These phases in the project’s life cycle were coordinated via a series of six meetings which brought together all partners. These meetings featured a balance of plenary sessions, which set the overarching framework, and meetings of smaller teams, which designed the Learning Units. This division of the work by learning unit teams also had important benefits. The sequencing of plenary and small group meetings not only facilitated the process of dividing and sharing the work, but also created opportunities for all members to have an input at macro and micro levels. A set of ground rules was agreed during the first meeting. One such rule was that decision taking via majority voting was rejected in favour of the principle that consensus should be reached on all major decisions. Although this takes longer in the short term, having a shared sense of ownership and

purpose produces many benefits and longer term efficiencies, and avoids the “significant delays due to implementation problems” which can follow decisions taken too quickly (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997:61). The above measures, designed to foster consensus and a shared sense of ownership, also contributed to the all important feeling of trust, the lack of which has long been a major obstacle to cross-cultural interactions (Sohmen and Levin 2001). Such trust was further fostered by activities, throughout the project’s life cycle, which were designed to promote team building and an environment conducive to innovation and creativity.

Evaluation of the IICEE Project

The IICEE project was monitored and evaluated at three stages:

Firstly, the design and kick-off periods of the project (Initiation phase) were periodically observed and analysed by a final-year student from the Fachhochschule Nordhausen, Germany who worked on the dynamics that govern international teams for her final-year project. Secondly, an interim monitoring report and a final evaluation were written by an external consultant to the project during the implementation phase and at the close-out period. Members were also requested to fill in a questionnaire developed by three team members. These evaluations concluded that academic and practical standards are high and innovative, especially considering the challenge of creating a satisfactory concept both for academic teaching and professional training.

As regards the IICEE project, communication within the group was not always efficient. Some information arrived late and entailed delivery delays and a reduplication of individual efforts and wastage of time. Moreover, due to the multi-disciplinary nature of the IICEE module few if any of the project team members possessed knowledge and experience across all three learning units. This meant that progress was slower than originally envisaged, and the learning materials were less well integrated by the end of the close-out phase of the project, in September 2006. In order to address these issues, revision and editing of the materials and a training workshop took place in April 2007.

Project Piloting

The project was piloted on the BA course in International Business & Intercultural Studies at Heilbronn University. Some materials of Learning Unit 1 were tried and tested with two groups of second-year students who completed their Intercultural Communication module by attending a twenty minute oral exam in which they were questioned on the relevant course contents. Students were given the university’s standard feedback form which allowed them to comment on how the unit compares with other similar courses and to point out what they appreciated most or least.

Student Evaluation

Over 90% of the students thought that the materials developed for Learning Unit 1 and their delivery were very good or good. In particular, they appreciated the following

- Variety of approaches and exercises
- Critical evaluation of the well-documented traditional culture models and approaches
- Some felt that the material lacked structure (which it did at the time it was piloted)
- The workload involved in unit one was thought to be balanced

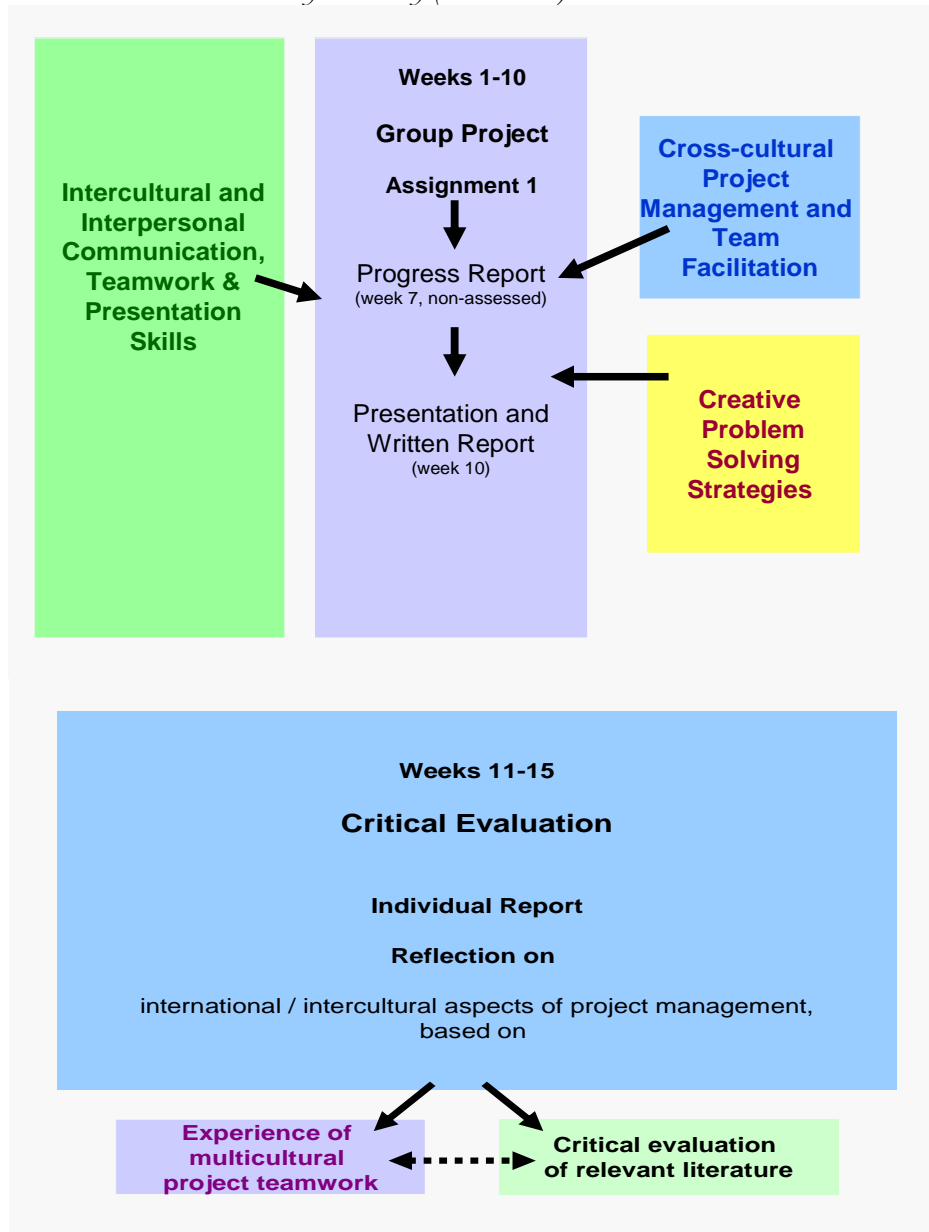
Experience of Delivering the Module at Thames Valley University

During the Spring and Summer 2007, the ‘Intercultural Communication for the Business Environment’ (ICBE) module was offered for the first time to a class of 16 students on the PG / MA in Hospitality/ Tourism Management programme at Thames Valley University. In most respects this was the same as the IICEE module, except that the European focus was removed to allow a more global application. Central to the delivery of the module was a group project, in which students researched and produced an intercultural training plan for a fictitious organisation of their choice. This provided the vehicle by which they acquired the practical project management and creative problem skills, while at the same time learning relevant intercultural theory.

Because of their extremely diverse cultural backgrounds, it was possible to arrange that students worked with four or five other students from different cultures to their own (Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Indian, Polish, Austrian, African/French, British, Jamaican, Brazilian). Following completion of the project, students produced a critical evaluation of their group project work, based on their personal experience, linked to a critical examination of relevant theoretical models.

Figure 2 provides an overview of the process:

Figure 2: The ICBE module at Thames Valley University (2006-2007)

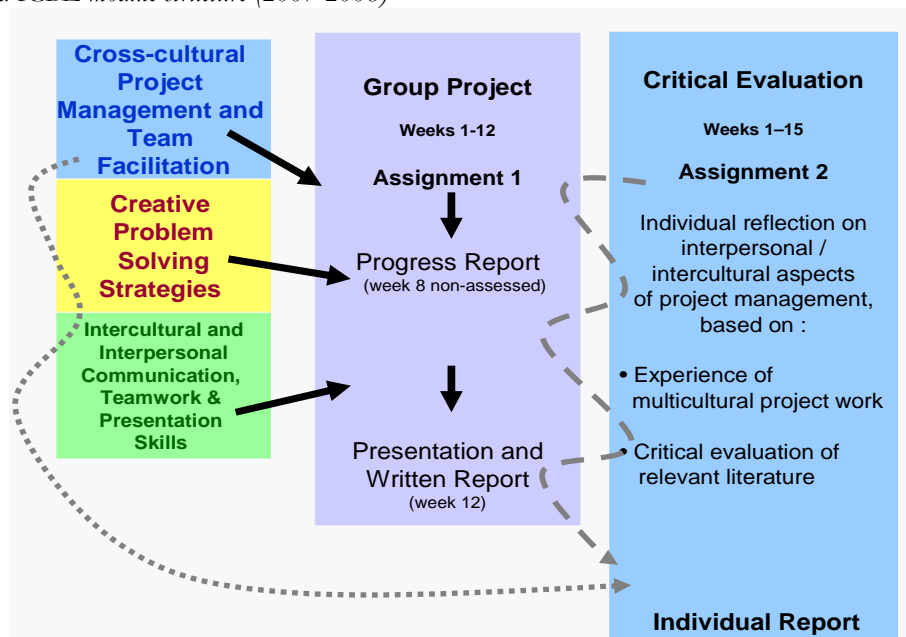


Evaluation of the Module

Some students had difficulty grasping the complexity of issues covered and with understanding what was required in the assignments. Making these issues clearer in the module guide is being addressed. Apart from these issues, evaluations relating to other aspects of the module were positive, and students particularly enjoyed the group discussions and “working with people of different cultures and background.” From the tutors’ perspective, it was apparent that despite being high throughout the duration of the project, energy levels amongst the students waned somewhat after presentation of the project. It was also felt that increased opportunities for reflection *during* the project – rather than after the event – would make clearer the links between the theory and application, and might also improve overall performance in both assignments as a result. It was therefore decided that for next year, the project report and presentation will be postponed until

Week 12. This will allow more time for reflection during the project and achieve more focused reflection during the final three weeks of the module.

Figure 3: Revised ICBE module structure (2007-2008)



Conclusion

The IICEE team has continued to meet in order to update and refine materials after European Commission support for the project ceased in September 2006. An ongoing concern has been the search for a satisfactory theoretical framework. Such a framework is needed, on the one hand, to provide a coherent rationale for the IICEE approach, i.e. for the integration of intercultural theory with applied, management competences. On the other, it should provide a means of drawing together the many disparate elements and apparent contradictions which exist in current conceptions of intercultural competence.

A useful starting point can be found in Rathje's (2007, 2) handling of four seemingly straightforward questions:

- “ the goal of intercultural competence (what is it good for?);
- the scope of intercultural competence (a universal or culture- specific competence?);
- the application of intercultural competence (in which situations is it needed?); and
- the cultural foundation (what understanding of culture forms the basis of intercultural competence?)”

Looking for answers in the relevant literature, Rathje's analysis reveals apparently contradictory standpoints which raise further questions. Does intercultural competence have the instrumental goal of improving individuals' productivity and efficiency, giving them an advantage in intercultural negotiations, or rather is the goal more broadly educational, with the emphasis on personal growth and development? Regarding the scope of intercultural competence, how generic are the skills involved and how far can these be distinguished from other professional competences? Does intercultural competence apply to interactions between people from different countries, or does it also apply to intercultural issues encountered within national boundaries? Finally, should the underpinning theoretical foundation see culture as something that creates coherence and homogeneity or is it rather concerned with the cohesion that exists within a group of human beings characterised by diversity?

In the context of globalisation, with growing complexity and social differentiation, the notion of single, coherent cultures appears difficult to sustain. Thus for Rathje, the outcome of intercultural competence should not be seen as the creation of a kind of half-way house between two distinct, but homogenous cultures

but rather as being concerned with the production of culture itself, and of the resulting cohesion. In her “Tentative definition of intercultural competence”, the ultimate goal becomes clear, once the foundation, scope and application are understood:

- “ Foundation: understanding culture as existing within human groups, characterised by cohesion due to familiarity with inherent differences.
- Scope: intercultural competence can be defined as a culture-generic skill.
- Application: relevant in interactions between individuals from different human groups experiencing foreignness
- Goal: that leads to culture production by creating familiarity and thus cohesion among the involved individuals allowing them to pursue their interaction goals.”

(Rathje 2007: 13)

If Rathje’s model is essentially theoretical, the IICEE/ICBE module can be seen as a way of applying it in practice. The combining of intercultural theory with project management and problem solving strategies develops in learners the necessary knowledge, understanding and skills to build the cohesion and atmosphere of creativity which are needed to allow multicultural project teams to pursue their interaction goals.

Finally, the search for intercultural competence needs to involve an open approach, one which should not aim to impose values or offer standardised solutions, but rather

“to provide frames of reference, to give analytical tools to explore in-depth trade-offs among short and long term alternative decisions, to involve individual managers in assessing their own values and paradigms in order to be more lucid and responsible in their own choices.”

(De Bettignies, cited by Schneider and Barsoux 2003: 258)

The IICEE/ICBE experience is summed up in the slightly non-standard English of one of this year’s participants:

“Through this module, I have met lots of different people from different country who even have not traditional personalities that people assume they should have. I have really learned and experienced intercultural communication. They are all so unforgettable, which help me to have knowledge and experience to deal with different people with different culture in future.”

(MA in Hospitality/Tourism Management student 2007)

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