

A Cooperative Approach for Facilitating Intercultural Education

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Classrooms around the world are now multicultural, multinational, and multilingual, and this means that educators face new challenges in teaching students of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. That we meet this challenge of intercultural education is critical if we are to achieve peaceful global unity.

The case of Germany today is illustrative. In 1989, when the Berlin Wall that had separated West Germany from East came down, a reformation of nations and states followed, particularly in eastern Europe. Countries and economies that had been considered stable suddenly collapsed. The Cold War ended soon after, but the hoped-for peace was lost in some areas of the world due to growing nationalism and ethnic tension. Populations began to migrate, with the result that Germany has grown into an extremely culturally and linguistically diverse society ([Finkbeiner, 1995, 2002a, 2002b](#)). Today, we face great challenges involving the dynamics of intercultural and multilingual learning groups. In the city of Kassel, for example, schools frequently serve large numbers of children from a range of backgrounds whose families are either first-generation migrants, asylum seekers, or second- or third-generation "guest workers" (these non-German long-term residents can now obtain German citizenship as long as they have lived in the country for at least eight years, have sufficient German language skills, do not have criminal records, and are willing to renounce their former citizenship).

Geography offers another reason intercultural education is a top priority. Germany, a country the size of the American state of Montana with a population of 80 million people, borders nine other countries: Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, France, Switzerland, Austria, the Czech Republic, and Poland. If you take a plane from any German airport and fly for more than 90 minutes, you will land in a place with a totally different culture and language.

The diversity of Germany today has encouraged educators to examine new definitions of literacy and new teaching and learning methods and strategies. It has led to a concentrated focus on what we now describe as new literacies, critical literacy, and critical pedagogy. These kind of literacies demand that students be able to communicate competently in media forms, whether print or electronic ([Finkbeiner, 2001a](#)). Students must also be able to access, comprehend, analyze, categorize, and evaluate text and hypertext. They need to understand such things as icons, images, charts, graphs, and voice and sound recordings.

We have applied these concepts of new literacies to intercultural learning, which has led to new possibilities of intercultural exchange. (For example, in summer 2002, we worked with Dorothy Chun at the University of California, Santa Barbara, to conduct a virtual intercultural exchange with our students, using the CULTURA project [[Furstenberg, Levet, English, & Maillet, 2001](#)] as a model). But we have learned that our vision is based on a notion of literacy that is not as completely new as we might think; it is, in fact, rather old -- but redefined. Just as we now discuss the advent of computers or the increased globalization of society as the most significant challenge ever to have faced education, 500 years ago people used the same kind of language in discussing the changes caused by the introduction of movable type. In 1457, when Gutenberg published the first bible produced with movable metal type, books became more broadly accessible and affordable, and literacy development was profoundly enhanced. Today, books are available to everyone in the developed world, though this is still not true for the developing world. Because of this inequity, literacy has become a declared human right. And, indeed, much has to be done until we can say that literacy is a shared value for all ([Finkbeiner, 1997](#)).

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What Is Intercultural Learning?

Before we are able to determine what to teach for intercultural learning, we have to make sure that we share a common understanding of the term. The construct *intercultural learning* consists of three parts:

- *Inter-* means that it happens between at least two things (objects, individuals, groups, etc.);
- *-cultural* is obviously more difficult to define, but the metaphors discussed below may enhance understanding;
- *learning* ideally may be seen as an active, autonomous process, in which individuals construct meaning by relating new information to prior knowledge in a continuing top-down and bottom-up process.

Metaphors for Culture

About one-seventh of an iceberg is visible, while the rest is under water. Culture, like an iceberg, consists of the observable and the nonobservable ([Weaver, 1993](#), p. 160). Differences in cultural communication can be observed in different situations, such as greeting routines and styles. Possibilities range from shaking hands to embracing and kissing, nodding the head, or not touching at all. However, the major part of culture is the nonobservable. It includes dimensions such as values, attitudes, and concepts. For example, family bonds are formed on the basis of one's perceptions and feelings -- things beyond what one can see and observe.

[Larson and Smalley \(1972\)](#) consider the influence that culture has on each individual and define it as a blueprint: "Culture...establishes for each person a context of cognitive and affective behavior, a blueprint for personal and social existence" (p. 39). [Brown \(1994\)](#), on the other hand, emphasizes the cultural community and defines culture as the "glue' that binds a group of people together" (p. 163).

[Hofstede \(1997\)](#) differentiates between two concepts of culture. Art and literature, for example, are "elements of culture one," while a second and broader understanding of culture includes "patterns of thinking, feeling and potential acting" (p. 4). He has coined a definition of culture as the "software of the mind," a dynamic mental program that shapes our personal development.

Cultural Development as Part of Personal Development

We believe that in order to better understand the cultural development of an individual, one has to consider personal development. Therefore, we developed a model (see Figure 1), drawing on the work of Piaget and Vygotsky and conceptualizing cultural socialization not as linear, but as a gradual process in concentric circles ([Finkbeiner & Koplin, 2000](#), p. 256).

Figure 1
Personality Development and Cultural Socialization

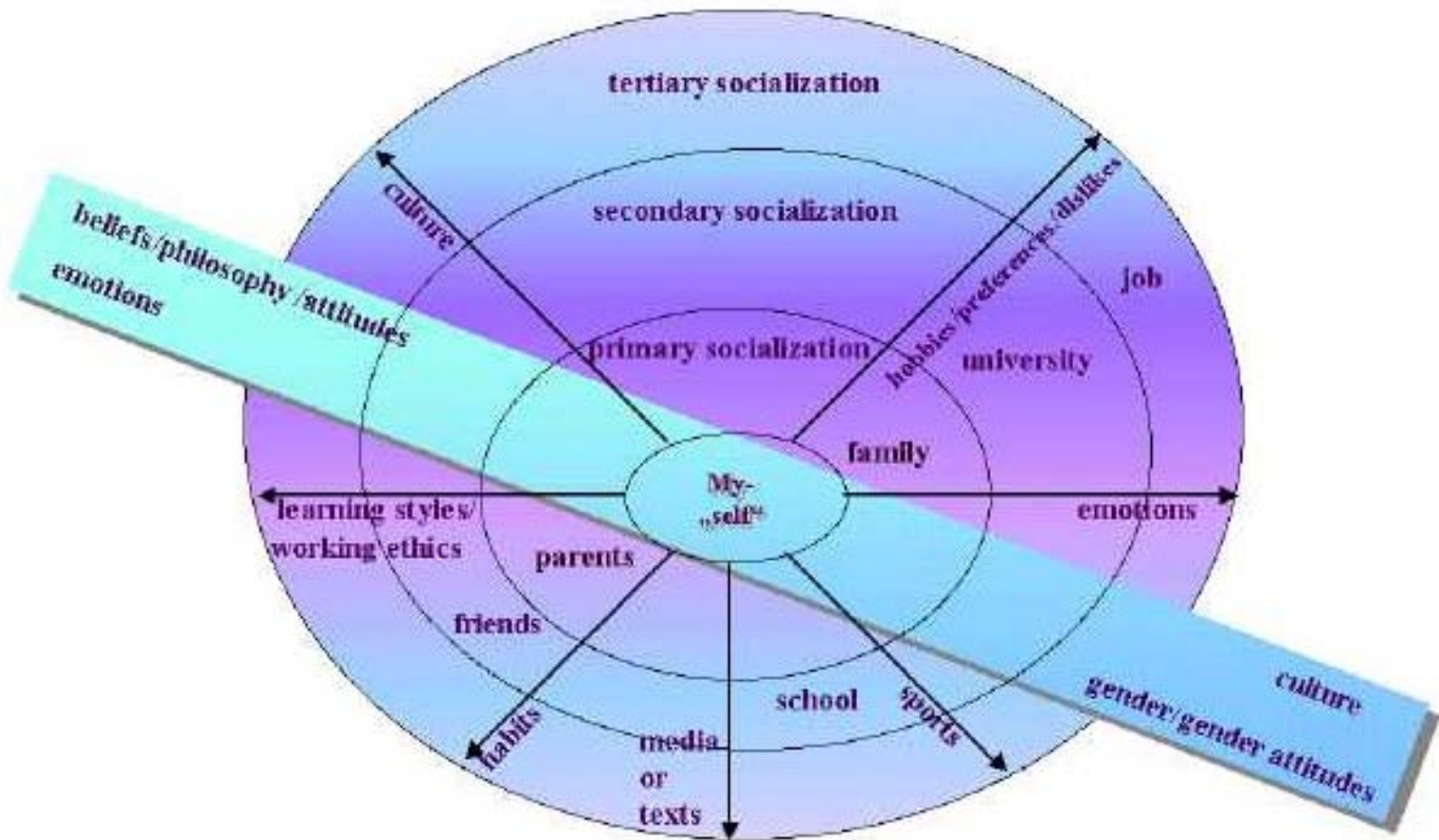


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The constructivist point of view holds that individuals construct the world in ways that help them make meaning of it and from it (Finkbeiner, in press-a). Thus, our cultural identity is the result of cognitive and constructive processes. From early childhood we categorize what we perceive, we form concepts and prototypes, and we attribute meaning to our experiences. These cognitive processes are accompanied by activities in the emotional domain of the brain. We associate feelings with perceptions and the resulting concepts. Thus, we not only develop a cultural identity, but also images of cultural preferences of our social environment. Garcia (1999) calls these "ethnic images" (p. 136).

Furthermore, experiences in our lives differ in their importance to us. At some points, our family is important to our perception of the world and our identity. Friends or colleagues may have more influence on us at other stages. Social experiences of various kinds influence our perception of the world and ourselves. We relate new cultural information to our existing knowledge, which has been constructed based on experiences within our own culture. In a nutshell, the construction of cultural knowledge is always socially conveyed.

The learning process that takes place is similar to a hermeneutic circle (Figure 2):

Figure 2
Hermeneutic Circle of Acquiring Cultural Knowledge

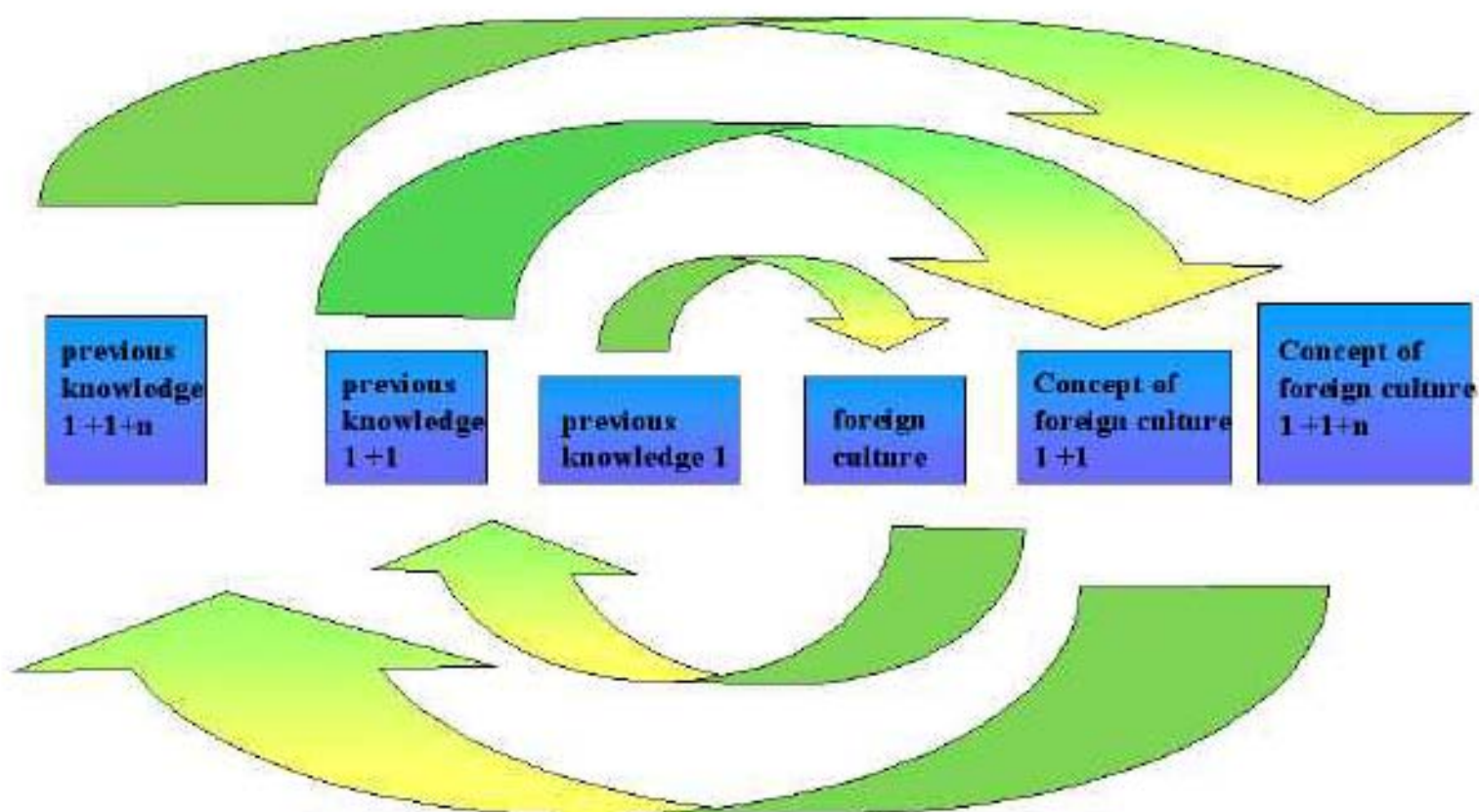


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We relate a certain part of a foreign culture we may encounter to our cultural categories in a cognitive and affective process that seems to be infinite (Finkbeiner & Koplín, 2000, p. 255). Cultural contact implies that we perceive aspects, behavior, values, and so on that are different from our own cultural background and thus provoke a rethinking of existing cultural categories (Finkbeiner, in press-a). In a situation of intercultural communication, we constantly move from our existing cultural knowledge to categorizing and relating new cultural information so that knowledge, ideally speaking, is always challenged, reshaped, and changed. We live in a "third space world" (Bredella, 1995, p. 22), a place between our own culture and that of the person with whom we are talking (O'Connor, 2000). We are not, however, conscious of this process, nor are we conscious of our cultural concepts and images. It may also happen that new information is not perceived as new, but rather ignored and just assimilated to the old information. This is the case when learners are not sensitive to cultural differences (Finkbeiner & Koplín, 2001).

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Discovering Cultural Concepts in a Cooperative Setting: The ABC's Model

Intercultural learning, therefore, implies that we have to become aware of the cultural concepts we hold -- our cultural self-concepts and concepts about people from other countries. In two university seminars for future teachers we have used Schmidt's (1998a) ABC's of Cultural Understanding and Communication as a model for practicing different training concepts. In our application, there are the five basic steps:

1. **Autobiography.** First, each participant writes an autobiography that includes key events related to her or his

education, family, religious tradition, recreation, successes, defeats, and so on. This helps our students build awareness of the personal beliefs and attitudes that form the traditions and values of cultural autobiographies (Banks, 1999).

2. **Biography.** After conducting several in-depth, audiotaped, unstructured or semistructured interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 1994; Spradley, 1979) with a person from a culture different from their own, participants construct a biography of key events in that person's life. This helps these future teachers begin to develop the cultural sensitivity necessary to analyze similarities and differences in the two life stories (Finkbeiner & Koplín, 2000, 2001; Schmidt, 1998a, 1998b, 2000; Spindler & Spindler, 1987).
3. **Crosscultural analysis and appreciation of differences.** Each future teacher studies the autobiography and biography and charts a list of similarities and differences (Cummins, 1986; Derman-Sparks, 1992; Finkbeiner & Koplín, 2000, 2001; McCaleb, 1994; Paley, 1989; Spindler & Spindler, 1987; Trueba, Jacobs, & Kirton, 1990).
4. **Cultural self-analyses of differences.** In this key component of the process, the participant now carefully examines the chart from step 3 and uses it to write an in-depth self-analysis of cultural differences, explaining the reasons for any personal discomfort or positive response. In this way, teachers begin to acquire insight about others and sense their own ethnocentricity (Spindler & Spindler, 1987).
5. **Plans for home-school connections.** Finally, the future teachers design yearlong plans for connecting home and school in children's reading, writing, listening, and speaking development, using what they have learned about cultural sensitivity through the ABC's model. They see ways to develop collaborative relationships with families in an atmosphere of mutual respect, so that students gain the most from their education (Faltis, 1993; Goldenberg, 1987; McCaleb, 1994). (It should be mentioned here that, culturally speaking, connections between the home and the school may play a different role in European countries than they do in the United States. For many Europeans, family privacy is of great importance. Yet in our current school project using the ABC's model, we will pursue home-school connections, trying to resolve the conflict parents' and students' may see between these connections and their privacy.)

The ABC's model enables creation of a situation of intercultural communication and allows participants' cognitive and affective processes to be documented (Finkbeiner, 2001b). It follows a cooperative, collaborative approach and fosters intercultural learning goals together with cooperative values that could very well contribute to the development of responsible citizens (Finkbeiner, 2002, in press-b). We believe that cooperative practice promotes student achievement and facilitates democratic and social processes.

We have found that face-to-face contact with people from different cultures and exposure to their life stories can make university students (and, in an adapted version, students in secondary school) prepared for a life-long intercultural learning process (Finkbeiner & Koplín, 2001, p. 120).

The ABC's Model: A European Adaptation

Our adaptation of Schmidt's model is as follows:

- Writing an autobiography to explore self-image and cultural self-concepts
- Eliciting thinking about cultural concepts through dialogue with a partner
- Conducting reciprocal narrative interviews focusing on relevant aspects of each partner's life story
- Reciprocal writing of biographies
- Analyzing self-image and image of the partner by relating and comparing images
- Conducting reciprocal interviews to validate the biographies, clarify, resolve misunderstandings, and make comparisons
- Creating a metacognitive reflection of the learning process through an intercultural diary
- Raising awareness with intercultural communication strategies

To date, we have succeeded in offering rich opportunities for exploration through the ABC's model within our own classes, where students have found partners from different cultures with whom to work. Students who participate in the courses on the ABC's and on intercultural learning thus have to commit to being both a researcher and a research subject (Finkbeiner 2001b, in press; Finkbeiner & Schnaitmann, 2001). Doing research actively and at the same time being willing to be interviewed as part of a partner's research encourages a highly cooperative approach and spirit in the classroom.

After preparing their autobiographies, conducting interviews, and writing biographies of their partners, participants discover that their perceptions are bound to their cultural knowledge. A crosscultural analysis follows, in which the future teachers reflect on differences and similarities between their biographies. While transcribing this conversation,

the participants can reflect on their learning process in detail. In addition, they can be asked to look for communication strategies that the transcriptions reveal: What do you do when you have to talk about misunderstandings, differences, or similarities with someone from a different cultural background? And, finally, an intercultural diary is written to reflect on the learning process as a whole.

In an elementary or secondary school setting, this model can be made less complex. However, the writing of an autobiography, the interview, the writing of a biography, a discussion, and a diary entry are all necessary components. In addition, in schools, international visitors can be invited to class for this process, but we have found that all involved must be informed and prepared to participate in the experience. It is also good to discuss with students any preconceived notions that they may have about a particular culture before the visitor arrives. This allows students to dispel any fears or stereotypes and to reflect on their image of the visitor during and after an interview ([Wallace, 1998, online document](#)).

The language issue. We use the ABC's model in our English as a foreign language classes and have agreed that all autobiographies and biographies must be written in English, the common *lingua franca*. Otherwise, it would be impossible to share the stories. However, 10 to 15 native languages are usually represented in our classes, and we find that English proficiency varies considerably among our students. Insisting on the use of English therefore involves compromise, since some students are more capable and comfortable than others in expressing their personal and private ideas.

Even for those who speak English exceptionally well, it can be difficult (and, for some, offputting) to express life stories in a language different from the one in which the life stories themselves are situated. Schemata and scripts often differ considerably, and values as well as attributions are not comparable. This means that the events described in the stories do not always translate easily from the native tongue into English. Very often the words are just not there. In Turkish or Chinese, for example, there are different words for *brother-in-law*, depending on whether one is referring to the man's or woman's family. In those cultures, the male and female family categories are more distinct and culturally more important. Such issues explain why we consider the validation of the biographies very important. When the biography is read aloud by the author, the person whose life story is being related is encouraged to clarify, reject, or intervene if misinterpretations resulting from language or cultural differences have occurred. The validation is only effective, however, if it is considered a cooperative act between researcher and subject (Finkbeiner 2001a, in press; Finkbeiner & Schnaitmann, 2001).

The language issue has to be considered even more in the secondary school setting. Proficiency levels in English as a second, foreign, or other language are generally lower among these students than among those in the university setting, and the challenges even greater.

We are concentrating on these issues in our research, focusing on cultural differences in schemata and scripts and the implications for second and foreign language teaching methodology as well as for intercultural education (Finkbeiner, in press-a). However, we should emphasize that, despite the challenges, we see advantages in asking students to write about their lives in a non-native language. It obviously creates a distance that allows students to reflect on their lives and perhaps to write about them more easily, particularly when the life story has been hard, tragic, or traumatic.

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Additional Possibilities for Encouraging Intercultural Learning

When we began using the ABC's model, we found that it was important to create settings in which intercultural learning could take place actively and be reflected upon. We tried to achieve this through the partner dialogue about the autobiographies. We also tried a holistic, action-oriented approach, implemented within a positive and equitable atmosphere (Banks, 1999; Finkbeiner, 1995, [2000](#)). To establish this atmosphere, we used the following warm-up exercises (Finkbeiner & Koplín, 2000, 2001):

- **Ask students to talk about the meaning of their names in their cultures.** Most native German students felt their names were just given according to parental taste or to fashion at the time they were born. It was surprising to many students to learn that their African peers had an English name and an African name. The African names signified birth position -- second son or fourth daughter, for example -- and important incidents before or after their birth. Some African students were named Hope or Mercy because there had been war in their country when they were born.
- **Have students write spontaneously about particular words.** Students can discover cognitive prototypes when asked to write spontaneously about, for example, a bird, a flower, or a tree. Depending on where they

have grown up, they will have acquired a specific schema for the bird, flower, and tree. Germans usually mention the oak, and Hawaiians the palm. Europeans might name the blackbird, while South Americans might think of a hummingbird. Cultural differences become obvious when cognitive prototypes are discovered.

- **Ask students to talk about different connotations of colors.** For example, in English-speaking countries, *blue* represents sadness, but in Germany you are "blue" if you have had too much to drink and in Cameroon and Nigeria, blue is the color of happiness and peace because it evokes the blue sky. Children, particularly, enjoy talking about these easy-to-perceive contrasts. It is also important to note that perceptions of the colors of the rainbow vary among cultures.
- **Draw objects typical of a culture.** Students draw objects that they can name in different languages but that look different from culture to culture. For example, a student might depict "bread," and show both German rye bread and Turkish pita. The word can be written in both languages under the corresponding pictures. This is important for raising both language awareness and cultural awareness ([Fehling, 2002](#)), which go hand in hand.

With older students, there are additional activities that can allow them to explore their self-concepts:

- **Writing and examining scripts.** Students write scripts about a visit to a restaurant or a journey on the bus. They can then read or act them out in front of other students. A German student might write, "I step into the restaurant. I choose a table, and I sit down and have a look at the menu. I order my meal, when the waiter comes to my table." An American student might begin by indicating that she waits to be seated by the restaurant host or hostess. By this means, students become aware of their cultural roots, other cultures, and possible misunderstandings.
- **Listening to music.** While evocative music plays in the background, students relax and breathe deeply. The teacher then tells them a story about a place they like and feel connected to. At a certain point, the teacher stops and asks the students to imagine themselves in the place. The teacher starts to talk again, and students help with the story ending. Then, students write their own stories and are able to see themselves as part of the stories. Through this activity, they become more aware of their concepts about themselves.
- **Analyzing dimensions of culture.** Older students can explore issues such as the dimension of directness in conversation among speakers of different languages (Hofstede, 1997, p. 5). English speakers, for example, might begin to ask for something with the indirect "Can you do me a favor, please?" German speakers tend to open directly with their aim, explained with precision -- as in "*Hilfst du [or, more formally, Helfen Sie] mir bitte dabei, diesen Einkaufswagen über die Strasse zu schieben?*" ["Would you please help me push this trolley across the street?"] ([House, 1996](#), p. 6, [online document](#)). Directness, therefore, has to be understood as a different cultural style rather than as an inappropriate behavior.

Students enjoy such analyses and learn to look for more of these cultural patterns. We believe that this is the aim of the intercultural learning process: to prepare students for lifelong intercultural learning via cultural awareness (Finkbeiner & Koplín, 2000, 2001).

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Discovering Cultural Concepts with the ABC's Model: Some Examples

We have had particularly effective intercultural conversations in our seminars for future teachers when we have applied the ABC model as described above. Our students were excited to have direct contact with one another in their search to identify cultural similarities and differences, and their learning became more independent. In the university setting we could ask students to transcribe their interviews and conversations so that we could follow a case study approach with them to evaluate the data they were collecting. Together, we did intensive case studies and cross-case analyses concerning the autobiographies, the interviews, and the biography validation interviews, looking for critical or striking incidents. In addition, we compared the biographies with the autobiographies and interviews and looked for similarities and differences. Concerning the interviews, we particularly looked for the use of communicative strategies and specific modes of intercultural communication.

The most striking results were found in the following areas:

- Crosscultural incidents
- Raising cultural awareness
- Intercultural communication strategies
- Cultural concepts

Crosscultural Incidents

Once our students had written their autobiographies, they began the cross-case analyses and discovered what we refer to as “crosscultural critical incidents.” These occurred in all students’ lives, regardless of cultural background, and included such things as a first trip abroad, a first encounter with racism and prejudice, and experiencing the loss of a parent early in childhood. This last critical incident was particularly revealing. Children experience losing a parent in many different ways: they might have to live without a parent for a limited time or forever, because of illness, death, or divorce. Although this occurs around the world, it is important to know, interculturally speaking, that there are significant differences in how different cultures approach notions of family. The following example of an early childhood critical incident shows these different crosscultural perspectives. Two of our female students, one from Cameroon and one from Germany, had lost one parent, but their autobiographies and crosscultural analyses show that there were both differences and similarities in the way they dealt with this loss. Social, personal, and cultural factors (highlighted in Table 1 in bold) determined how each student responded to the loss, which supports our model of personal and cultural development described above. In one case the physical absence of the mother could be compensated, in the other case not. However, in both cases, family bonds encompassed more than biologically related parents and siblings.

**Table 1
Crosscultural Critical Incident: Loss of a Parent**

Excerpt from Autobiography, Student 1 from Cameroon	Excerpt from Autobiography, Student 2 from Germany
<p>One of the nicest things that can happen to you in life is to have a happy childhood. After I was born in the town of B., my mother became sick and was admitted in a clinic far away from our home. She had to spend more than one year at hospital. My grand-parents decided to take me with them at their home in M., more than 4 hours far away from my birthplace. I was about 2 years old and could not really realize what was going on. M. is a little town in Western Cameroon.... The town has a seasonal market and my grand-mother use to sell dry fish and “Garry.” My grand-father was a very lovely person. He used to “spoil me with presents.” In those days R., the elder sister of my mother, visited my grand-parents almost every month. She was so kind to me that I felt she was my mother. They all try their best not to make me feel the absence of my mother. I think they have succeeded, because I did not feel that a mother was missing. I became used to my aunt, and if I had cried to see my mother, it was ., because in my mind she was my mother. Every time when she had to leave I cried asking her to take me with her. I was never told that my real mother was suffering in a hospital.</p>	<p>I have two sisters, C. and S. C. was already four years old when I was born and S. is five years younger than me. In 1981, when I was two years old, my parents were divorced. C. stayed with my mother and I moved into a new flat with my father. When I was four years old, he married again. So S. is a daughter of my father and my stepmother, but I don’t really care about that. For me she is a “real” sister, although I can’t cope with her mother. There is a “disliking” from both sides which increased year by year. It happened so much, that I cannot and I do not want to tell something about that. My mother found a new partner pretty soon, too. He...has two sons, both from his first marriage. My mother and he did not marry until now, but they have been living together now for seventeen years.</p>

Although there are similarities in that both young women “lost” a parent, the two stories develop and are experienced in a very different way because of different family circumstances, the way in which losses are compensated for in different situations, and the different ages of the students when the loss occurred.

Raising Cultural Awareness

In the course of the dialogues and interviews that followed writing the autobiographies, we often found that students became aware of their individual cultural backgrounds. The following interview excerpt demonstrates one student’s reflections related to her background. Her mother is French and her father Italian. The parents were divorced, but the student had experienced two cultures since her early childhood.

Well, I was born in France, in the South of France, in N., but I also have Italian origin. And this is perhaps the first contradiction of my life, that I was born in one culture but really influenced by another. The cultures and countries are close to each other.

My parents are from very different backgrounds -- [laughing] that’s another contradiction of my life! My mum is from the very, very high society of Normandy, and my father comes from the suburbs of N. So that was really contradictory because there are really, really two different worlds, and I have

two very, very different families. And that's perhaps the reason why my parents in the long term didn't get along too well together.

But, OK, I was brought up in the higher class with all the privileges that implies. Thanks to my mum for that. But I'm not from this world, and I'm not from the other one, either. I feel comfortable in both of them, I know how to react in both of them, but I'm not a snob, because I hate when it's superficial. I hate snobbism and all that, but I'm not from the other class either. So, I think on my own, I try to find a reasonable equilibrium....

Germans are really strict like I am and like most of the French are. Germans...are perhaps even more than we are, and that's what I sometimes don't understand because I'm more flexible. And I'm really flexible -- [smiling] that comes from Italy.

Obviously this student has reached a stage of intercultural awareness at which she can evaluate and shows empathy differences. She is also aware of the influence of her parents' different social and economic backgrounds. At this level of reflection, she is ready to contrast the two cultures of her parents and the culture of Germany, where she is studying.

Intercultural Communication Strategies

Like this French student, Student 1 from Cameroon started to reflect on intercultural issues. She compared cultures by categorizing cultural elements in the first interview with Student 3, a German:

Student 3: [You are from] the village of B.

Student 1: Yes. That's where I grew up, B. And B., it has about 200 or 300 inhabitants...I would say more -- 500 or 1,000 inhabitants. You know, it's just like Vellmar and Kassel [in Germany]. So there's only a bridge separating B. from Kassel.

Student 3: [interrupting] Ah?...

Student 1: [louder] B. and D.! Sorry! [laughing] So, if you wanted to buy things like clothes or to shop...go to...go shopping, so you have to travel.... You have to go to D. -- to the center, it was called. Like here: when you go to Kassel, you say, "I'm going to the town center." So, D. is kind of [the] town center, and B. [is] just a suburb. Yes, that's how it was.

Student 1 is also aware of the role that language plays in successful intercultural communication and encounters. Her journey to Germany marked the first time she had left her country on her own. When she arrived at the airport in Frankfurt, she discovered that the family that was supposed to pick her up had not been told when she would arrive. So she had to arrange a train ride to Kassel and figure out the German telephone system, as she described to Student 3:

Student 1: Yes, so, and.... Yes, since that time, I have...no fear. I could, I can, I don't know -- you just have to give me the address, I can travel from. I don't know -- to Asia, I would just ask my way.... If I know the language, it's just [laughing].... It wouldn't be a problem!...

And at the end of the semester, you go in another, ah, year and, ah, after that you can have a bachelor, and.... Yes, it's like in England, the system in England -- the same -- or in France....

I have been living in Germany since the end of October 1979.

Student 3: Umm...

Student 1: 1997! Sorry! [laughing] Because...I'm used to German numbers, so I said it the wrong way!

Student 1 applied several strategies very effectively during this intercultural encounter. Over the course of the interview, she switched between English and German -- and even French -- or she transferred this switching strategy to the cultural level. She used English and French culture as a kind of "cultura franca" to compare Cameroon and Germany. She also applied general communication strategies that helped to keep an effective conversation going. She corrected herself, was flexible in finding ways to express herself, and she did not hesitate to ask for words or sentences that were not clear to her. Her apologies when she thought she had misunderstood her interview partner contributed to a polite, respectful communicative atmosphere. This sort of atmosphere is essential to successful intercultural communication and goes hand in hand with cultural awareness and use of general and specific strategies

in establishing intercultural communicative competence (Finkbeiner & Koplín, 2000, 2001).

Implicit Cultural Concepts

As mentioned above, cultural concepts are learned implicitly; they exist as abstractions and only rarely as concrete elements. An excerpt from Student 3's interview with Student 1 again provides an illustration. Student 3 was impressed by Student 1's ability to express empathy through physical closeness -- something unfamiliar in German culture.

Student 3: [reading from her biography of Student 1] Even Student 1's gestures are showing that she is a frank person. She very often touches your hand or your arm etc.....

[Both laugh]

Student 1: Yeah, this behavior is different to mine. Germans do not do that. [laughing] But from the very beginning I have not felt inconvenient [uncomfortable]. I oppositely [On the contrary, I] started imitating her.

[Both giggle]

Student 1: I don't know, did you...did you recognize this?...

Student 3: Yeah, um, so, in Africa -- no, not in Africa, it's a whole continent -- but, um, in Cameroon, you are.... How could you say? Aware of your...of your body? Of your gestures? You are very close to each other, or...?

Student 1: I would say yes.

Student 3: More close than Germans.

Student 1: Yes, more close than Germans -- you know, in our gestures, when you.... I don't know.... You are very close to each other, yes....

Student 3: And, um, when you came to Germany did you...did you, um, recognize this immediately, or...?

Student 1: Yes.

Student 3: Yes?

Student 1: Yes, I -- it was totally different. People behaved, um, differently and I had to behave accordingly to them. Because sometimes we meet someone here you say, "Hello!" You want to shake hands. But you don't know if he wants to, if he also wants to shake hands. So I just say, "Hello!" and that's all. But in Cameroon I wouldn't say, "Hello!" and...stand there. I would say, "Hello!" and then I would shake hands.... [laughing, and stretching her hand out to Susanne, who shakes it]

Student 3: ...It's just cultural, you know?

Student 1: *Ja, ja* [Yes, yes], of course! Because.... When I was in Japan, I myself recognized that I came too close! You know?

Student 3: It's like in France, you know. People are very close, when they are...when they are friends. When they meet, they kiss each other.

It is difficult to find out about another culture's values; often we discover them only through misunderstandings. Generally, we are unconscious of the values of our own culture. One typical example came from a female German student who mentioned in her autobiography that even traveling to a different country does not necessarily result in learning a lot about its culture. However, most of our students reported on changes in previously held stereotypes and perceptions, gained by living in a different country. For example, Student 4, from Nigeria, discussed his image of Germany in his autobiography:

The only thing we knew much about was that the Germans built Mercedes Benz, that they built BMW and that they make Porsche. They make all fine cars and all the good electronics. These were the stereotypes and the prejudices. Yeah, I will go to Germany so I will drive a Mercedes or a BMW or a Porsche. So everybody really wants to go to Germany where they drive Porsche and BMW, those were always the impressions we had....

When I came to Germany it became very, very interesting, coming from a culture that is very different from the German culture and mentality. In the first year I had a lot of problems

understanding the people and the mentality and the culture. But the longer I lived in Germany, the more I understood the people and the way they live.

Later as we proceeded through the ABC's process, it became obvious that Student 4 had become aware of one reason for prejudice based on stereotypes or xenophobia. In an interview with a German student, he recalled that it was difficult for his mother in Nigeria to accept close relationships between her sons in Europe and European women:

In the beginning my mother was very much like most German parents. The German parents would maybe say, "Please, don't bring a black man to my house." Similarly my mother would say "Don't bring a white woman to my house." But as time went on, my mother began to understand. She understood that we are men and that as men we are living outside our homeland and we are living in a very different culture. So we were able to make her understand that there is nothing to fear or worry about the German culture or European culture. Today she is more pro-Western culture and more pro-European than ever before. I would say today that because now she has a mixed child, she is very much different from the time we left home.

The "mixed child" is Student 4 himself, who feels European but remains certain that his roots are in Nigeria and that he wants to return there one day.

The interviews proved that stereotypes are not necessarily negative but rather are a basic category of perception. However, we also learned that if stereotypes are connected with xenophobia and hatred, then they lead to racism in any ethnic groups. This is demonstrated by the following excerpt from an interview with Student 4:

When I was new in Germany, I met a girl -- a very nice girl -- and she invited me to her house. The father was Turkish -- actually the stepfather was Turkish -- and the mother was German. The girl was German, too. So she invited me to her place and I went there; we drank tea together. When I left the house, the parents warned the girl that she should never, never bring a black man in their house again. I didn't know this at the time. A friend of mine, a German teacher in the *Gymnasium* [academic high school], came to tell me -- ask me -- if I had been there at her house. And he said, yeah, this is what the girl's parents told her and that I should not be surprised if the girl doesn't invite me to her house anymore. Or if she doesn't even say hello to me anymore. So, um, that was the first experience I really had with racism.

Racism happens across cultural and ethnic groups. For example, Student 4's German interview partner reported sad moments when she visited Australia and was called a Nazi. She had been born 30 years after the end of World War II, yet she was labeled as someone who had caused terrible injustice and terror. Of course, she was aware of her history and willing to communicate her knowledge about it; yet it was hard for her to explain that she had grown up in a modern, multicultural society that offers a home to immigrants and asylum seekers from all over the world.

After a close look at the transcripts of the biography validation interviews, we discovered another important result of our use of the ABC's model. Students noticed that they held different opinions as a result of their different cognitive concepts of relationships, feelings, and so on. For example, one interview pair (Student 5 from Germany and Student 6 from Cameroon) discovered that they had different concepts of *friend*:

Student 5: Yeah, when I wrote this I thought you didn't mention, um, real friends. I mean, you mentioned a lot of people you went to school with and your family, but no special friends.

Student 6: There are many, so [indcipherable]. There were so many. But I have friends I could have mentioned. It's [indcipherable] there were many. About six.

Obviously, to have a friend can mean having a cordial, friendly relationship or a special, close relationship. To learn more about the meaning of *friend* for our students, we administered a questionnaire developed by the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Institut National des Télécommunications for the CULTURA project (Furstenberg, Levet, English, & Mailliet, 2001). One of the questions required a definition of a "true friend." Responses clearly showed that students had very different concepts of *friend*, depending primarily on where they had been socialized.

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Summary

Our students' cross-case analyses indicate that use of the ABC's model led to increased and differentiated understanding of cultures and a desire to extend knowledge about cultural customs, concepts, and values. Our students began the process of developing cultural awareness and strategies on how to communicate in an intercultural setting. They also learned how to revise or dispel stereotypes in a constructive way. By learning to reflect on the subjectivity of their own thoughts and language, they also learned to step outside boundaries and develop more critical literacy. They stopped taking things for granted and learned to pause, rethink, and let partners talk. In this way, they developed

- Critical thinking
- Metacognitive awareness
- Cultural and language awareness
- Cooperation
- Awareness of the subjectivity and relativity of culture and thinking
- Increased competence in using different research methods
- Self-confidence
- Better understanding of and trust in others

In conclusion, the ABC's model appears to be a successful approach for encouraging cultural awareness. Its strength is that it supports discovery of one's own identity through exploration of the cultural identity of others. Students who have experienced the ABC's go through major changes. As a result, they become more aware of their own cultural limits, yet at the same time grow more self-confident as they reflect on and learn to appreciate what it means to be both the same and yet different.

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