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## The Impact of ESL Discussion Groups in an Undergraduate Counselling Psychology Course

**Abstract:** This study aimed to understand the impact of an experiential learning activity in a third year undergraduate course on the theory and practice of counselling and psychotherapy at a small Canadian university campus. The experiential learning activity required students to participate in bi-weekly one-to-one discussion groups with international students participating in English as a Second Language (ESL) programs at the university. The results of two pre- and post-assessment measures demonstrated that the students' cultural competence and cultural intelligence scores improved after participating in the course. Findings may encourage more university educators to develop experiential learning activities between domestic and international students.

**Keywords:** experiential education, experiential learning, ESL, English as a Second Language, counselling psychology, undergraduate teaching, cultural competence, cultural intelligence

**摘要** (Sonya Corbin Dwyer: ESL 讨论小组在大学基础阶段的学位课程中对于心理咨询的影响): 这项研究的目的是为了了解在第三学年获取学士学位的过程中, 以经验为导向的学习活动对加拿大一所小型大学校园的咨询和心理疗法的理论和实践所产生的影响。以经验为导向的学习活动要求学生与国际学生们一同参加为期两周的一对一的讨论组, 后者均参加了在大学里的英语作为第二语言 (ESL) 的计划。评估前后的两项措施的结果表明, 参加该课程之后, 学生们的文化能力和智力都得到了提高。该结果可以鼓励更多的大学教师在本地和国际学生之间开展以经验为导向的学习活动。

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**Zusammenfassung** (Sonya Corbin Dwyer: Die Auswirkungen von ESL-Diskussionsgruppen in einem Studiengang für Beratungspsychologie im Grundstudium): Ziel dieser Studie war es, die Auswirkungen einer erfahrungsorientierten Lernaktivität in einem Bachelor-Studiengang im dritten Jahr auf die Theorie und Praxis der Beratung und Psychotherapie an einem kleinen kanadischen Universitätscampus zu verstehen. Die erfahrungsorientierte Lernaktivität erforderte von den Studierenden die Teilnahme an zweiwöchentlichen Einzelgesprächsgruppen mit internationalen Studierenden, die an Programmen für Englisch als Zweitsprache (ESL) an der Universität teilnahmen. Die Ergebnisse von zwei Maßnahmen vor und nach der Bewertung zeigten, dass sich die kulturelle Kompetenz und die kulturelle Intelligenz der Studierenden nach der Teilnahme am Kurs verbesserten. Die Ergebnisse könnten mehr Hochschullehrer ermutigen, erfahrungsorientierte Lernaktivitäten zwischen einheimischen und internationalen Studierenden zu entwickeln.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Erlebnispädagogik, Erfahrungslernen, ESL, Englisch als Zweitsprache, Beratungspsychologie, Undergraduate Teaching, kulturelle Kompetenz, kulturelle Intelligenz

**Резюме** (София Корбин Двайер: О роли работы в тандем-группах на занятиях по английскому языку как второму иностранному (направление подготовки «Консультационная психология», начальный этап

обучения): Цель данной работы состоит в представлении результатов учебной активности студентов-бакалавров третьего курса, изучающих теоретические и прикладные аспекты консультационной психологии и психотерапии в небольшом канадском университете. Данная учебная активность была связана с познанием «иной» ментальности через участие в двухнедельных тандем-группах с иностранными студентами, обучающимися на программе «Английский язык как второй иностранный». Результаты двух «срезов», проведенных до и после реализации проекта, показали, что после участия в данных образовательных мероприятиях уровень культурной компетентности и культурной интеллигентности студентов повысился. Подобный формат обучения мог бы стать хорошим примером для вузовских преподавателей и вдохновить их на более активное использование в образовательной деятельности потенциала межкультурного общения между «местными» и иностранными студентами.

**Ключевые слова:** педагогика приключений, обучение «опытным» путем, изучение английского языка как второго иностранного, консультационная психология, обучение студентов-бакалавров, культурная компетентность, культурная интеллигентность

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A common term used to label the process of learning from experience is 'experiential learning.' This term is not new, defined in 1975 by Hoover and Whitehead (as cited in Gentry, 1990): "Experiential learning exists when a personally responsible participant cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally processes knowledge, skills, and/or attitudes in a learning situation characterized by a high level of active involvement" (p. 10). Kolb and Kolb (2005) emphasized the need for "learning spaces that promote growth-producing experiences for learners," citing Dewey's philosophy that not all experiences are educative (p. 205). Kolb (1984) stated that the experiential learning model "emphasizes the critical linkages that can be developed between the classroom and the 'real world'" (p. 3).

"Experiential education is a method, a profession, and a philosophy" (Gilbertson, Bates, McLaughlin, & Ewert, 2006, p. 9). As a method, experiential education encompasses a variety of curriculum activities, each focusing on learning by doing and direct experience (Roberts, 2012). Experiential learning activities require that the learner be actively engaged in reflecting and constructing meaning (Gilbertson, et al., 2006).

This study aimed to understand the impact of an experiential learning activity in a third year undergraduate course on the theory and practice of counselling and psychotherapy offered at a small Canadian university campus. Specifically, did it help improve cultural intelligence and cultural competence?

Thomas (2006) uses a basic definition of cultural intelligence "as the ability to interact effectively with people who are culturally different" (p. 80). He explains it is the capability to adapt to, and shape, the cross-cultural interaction context. Similarly, Núñez (2000) defines cultural competence as a "set of skills that allow individuals to increase their understanding of cultural differences and similarities within, among, and between groups" (p. 1071). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully explore these concepts, it is important to note that it is "important to understand why some individuals function more effectively than others in culturally diverse situations" (Ang, & van Dyne, 2008, p. 3).

## The Context

The undergraduate course, called Contemporary Issues in Psychotherapy, examines basic issues in counselling practice, as well as theories and techniques of counselling. As an introductory course, there is a focus on communication skills, in particular active listening, attending, and nonverbal communication skills. The textbook for the course states "It is an *ethical obligation* for counselors to develop sensitivity

to cultural differences if they hope to make interventions that are consistent with the values of their clients" (Corey, 2017, p. 25). Therefore, the course also explores ethnocentrism and cross-cultural communication.

The experiential learning activity required students to participate in bi-weekly one-to-one discussion groups with international students participating in English as a Second Language (ESL) programs at the university, for a total of five sessions. The discussion groups were based on the Big Talk approach created by Kalina Silverman (2020). This discussion group format is designed with the intention of helping people make more meaningful connections. Each hour-long session consisted of two 30-minute conversations, each with a different partner. Each conversation had a set of three related questions to help guide the conversation. For example: What are you most thankful for today? How can you show gratitude? What single object would you save if your house caught on fire?

Following Kolb's (2015) Experiential Learning Cycle, the students participated in Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Active Experimentation. The psychology students learned about concepts in the classroom and then later engaged in self-reflections that included examining what they were learning about themselves, skills they were developing, how they might use what they learned in the future, and any differences in their pre- and post-assessment scores. Students submitted two written reflections, one at midterm and the other at the end of the semester. In addition, class discussions were held weekly to monitor any issues and problem-solve if necessary, giving students the opportunity to try new approaches and skills in their upcoming sessions.

## Method

### *Participants*

Twenty-one students were enrolled in the class and 19 chose to participate in the study. All were psychology majors. There were three men and 18 women in the course, as well as two students who were older than average. Therefore, participants were not asked to identify their gender or age to keep their responses anonymous.

### *Data Collection*

To answer the research question "does participating in ESL discussion groups improve students' levels of cultural competence," the results of two pre- and post-assessment measures were utilized. These measures were part of the course curriculum and students completed the measures as part of their own self-reflection. After they completed the post-measure in class, the study was described by the instructor and the students were invited to participate. Using self-addressed envelopes provided by the instructor, students voluntarily submitted copies of their pre- and post-measures at the end of the semester by means of inter-office mail, with all identifying information removed. The students were informed that the envelopes would not be opened until final marks for all psychology courses taught by the instructor were submitted. This procedure was approved by a research ethics board and permission was obtained from the authors to use the scales for teaching and research purposes.

### *Pre- and Post-Measures*

The *Cultural Competence Self-assessment Checklist* (Rexdale Women's Centre, n.d.) consists of 36 statements divided into three sections: 1) Awareness, 2) Knowledge, and 3) Skills. It uses a 4-point Likert

scale ("never" to "always/very well") designed to help individuals identify areas of strength and areas that need further development. A sample Awareness statement is: "I have a clear sense of my own ethnic, cultural and racial identity;" a sample Knowledge statement is: "I will really listen to the answers before asking another question;" and a sample Skills statement is: "I can act in ways that demonstrate respect for the culture and beliefs of others."

The *Short Form Cultural Intelligence Scale (SFCQ)* (Thomas et al., 2015) consists of 10 statements about one's experiences when interacting with people from other cultures. It uses a 5-point Likert scale ("not at all" to "extremely well") to indicate how the statements describe the individual. A sample statement is: "I think a lot about the influence that culture has on my behavior and that of others who are culturally different." The authors stated that the short form cultural intelligence scale (SFCQ) is a theory-based, short measure of cultural intelligence that "captures the original theoretical intent of a multifaceted culture general form of intelligence that is related to effective intercultural interactions" (p.1099). Validity was established with 3526 participants in five language groups. "Results provide evidence for of the measure, and indicate that cultural intelligence is a single latent factor reflected in three intermediate facets" of cross cultural knowledge, skills and cultural metacognition (p. 1099).

## Results

Repeated measures *t*-tests were conducted on the pre-test total of each scale compared to the post-test total. Repeated measures *t*-tests were also conducted on the pre- and post-scores of the three subscales of each measure. These were planned comparisons so no correction factor was used. Not all students completed all of the questions so the sample sizes range from 13-17.

The total score on the *Cultural Competence Self-assessment Checklist* (Rexdale Women's Centre, n.d.) can range from 36-144. The higher the score, the more culturally competent one is. The students' total Cultural Competence score ( $n = 13$ ) was significantly higher at the end of the course than at the beginning ( $p = .014$ ) as the mean increased from 112.5 to 121.8. The students' Cultural Awareness score ( $n = 17$ ) was significantly higher at the end of the course than at the beginning ( $p = .001$ ) as the mean increased from 33.7 to 37.4 (range can be from 11-44). Their Cultural Knowledge score ( $n = 16$ ) was significantly higher at the end of the course than at the beginning ( $p = .024$ ) as the mean increased from 42.3 to 45.5 (range can be from 13-52). As well, the students' Cultural Skills score ( $n = 16$ ) was also significantly higher at the end of the course than at the beginning ( $p = .003$ ) as the mean increased from 37.1 to 40.9 (range can be from 12-48).

The scores on the *Short Form Cultural Intelligence Scale (SFCQ)* (Thomas et al., 2015) can range from 1-5 as scores on the items are totaled and divided by the number of items. The higher the score, the higher the level of cultural intelligence. Students' overall Cultural Intelligence score ( $n = 17$ ) was significantly higher at the end of the course than at the beginning ( $p < .001$ ) as the mean increased from 3.7 to 4.2. Students' Cultural Knowledge score was significantly higher at the end of the course than at the beginning ( $p = .008$ ) as the mean score increased from 3.4 to 3.9. Their Cultural Skills score was significantly higher at the end of the course than at the beginning ( $p = .001$ ) as the mean score increased from 3.7 to 4.3. Last, the students' Cultural Metacognition score was significantly higher at the end of the course than at the beginning ( $p = .008$ ) as the mean score increased from 3.7 to 4.2.

## Conclusion

While the primary objective of the experiential learning activity was to provide students with opportunities to practice their communication skills, the activity included a focus on cross-cultural communication skills development. The students' total scores on both measures increased significantly from the beginning of the course to the end. Further, each of their subscale scores increased significantly from the beginning of the course to the end. The students' Cultural Competence, Cultural Knowledge and Cultural Awareness scores (as measured by the *Cultural Competence Self-assessment Checklist* (Rexdale Women's Centre, n.d.)) all improved after participating in the course, which included the on-going experiential learning activity of discussion groups with ESL students. Likewise, their Cultural Intelligence, Culture Knowledge, Cultural Skills, and Cultural Metacognition (as measured by the *SFCQ* (Thomas et al., 2015)) also improved.

Thomas et al. (2015) explained that cultural intelligence as measured by the *SFCQ* is multidimensional and identifies individual differences that will explain and predict effectiveness in a cross-cultural context—the ability to interact effectively. It is a type of intelligence, not intercultural competence or motivation. Similar to other forms of intelligence, it is the ability to adapt to an environmental context: the cultural context. It is a unique construction of abilities including knowledge, skills, and metacognition.

The authors of the *Cultural Competence Self-assessment Checklist* used in this study stated in their introduction: "Remember that cultural competence is a process, and that learning occurs on a continuum and over a life time" (Rexdale Women's Centre, n.d). Diller and Moule (2005) also asserted that cultural competence for all individuals is a developmental process and an ideal toward which to strive. It requires the "continual acquisition of knowledge, the development of new and more advanced skills, and ongoing reflective self-evaluation of progress" (p. 13). While this study supports the use of ESL discussion groups as a means of enhancing the cultural competence of psychology students, it is acknowledged that one experiential activity is not enough—but it is a start.

Jayakumar (2008) pointed out that in U.S. colleges, most incoming students have primarily been exposed to people of their same race and White students in particular tend to have minimal interaction with people of other racial backgrounds before college. Jayakumar also noted that while some institutions may have structural diversity (the numerical representation of students of color within an institution), this form of diversity alone does not lead to the development of cross-cultural competence. The same two points could be made about the setting for this study. Perhaps because of this, the psychology students openly expressed throughout the semester how much they enjoyed the discussion groups and in particular, meeting the students in the ESL program with whom they previously did not have an opportunity to interact. They were adamant that the activity be continued in future offerings of the course.

While using experiential learning activities to prepare students for working with culturally diverse clients is an important aspect of counsellor education (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002), the course being studied was at the undergraduate level so students may not pursue a career in a helping profession. However, promoting the development of self-awareness, knowledge, and skills for working with culturally diverse populations can enhance undergraduate students' personally and professionally as these skills are applicable to many, if not most, future careers. The ability to adapt to different perspectives and cultures has become a necessity in order to be successful in an increasingly diverse workplace.

A limitation of this study is the lack of a control group, students in the course who did not participate in the experiential activity. As this study was on a specific teaching approach, it was not appropriate to exclude some students from the activity. Future studies could utilize a qualitative approach, exploring

the experience of participating in the ESL discussion group, which may reveal other strengths of the activity.

There are many ways to provide students with experiential learning activities to develop their cultural intelligence, as other instructors have found (e.g., Kurpis & Hunter, 2017). Participating in on-campus ESL discussion groups is an accessible option for many instructors and their students. In addition to the significant increase in cultural intelligence and cultural competence as demonstrated by the statistical analysis of their pre- and post-measures, anecdotal feedback from both the domestic and international students was also supportive of many other learning outcomes, both formal and informal, as they learned about themselves while learning about other people.

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