

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: *Looking back in time, history shows us, by the fact that no society has lasted for more than 100 years without generating a war, that we are facing a problem. Doesn't it seem hilarious, because everyone knows this, and we take it for granted? It is here that we have the hint that since the world has existed, there has never been a healthy society. In order to be able to build a healthy intercultural society, strong collaboration and less competition are needed, or a too competitive style between societies brings division, where everyone fights for the supremacy of their own culture. These struggles are the result of many smaller problems that have not been properly managed and solved, usually over several years, which later turned into mass disorder and have led to wars. Consequently, this paper describes some key concepts that stand out which not being properly managed and developed or their lack lead to the destruction of a culture, a society. Thus, we teachers, are the ones in the first line, who can bring to the attention of our disciples these major cultural problems, in order to build a healthy intercultural society in our country and abroad. Through the method of analysis and comparison of several papers and opinions, a personal opinion emerged regarding this current topic, in the context of Europeanization and globalization of economies.*

Key words: *communication across cultures, intercultural education, interpersonal conflict, globalization multiculturalism, multicultural education.*

JEL CLASSIFICATION: A23

1. Introduction

Culture is the lifeblood of a vibrant society, expressed in the many ways we tell our stories, celebrate, remember the past, entertain ourselves, and imagine the future. Our creative expression helps us define who we are, and helps us see the world through the eyes of others (Brown 2011). In addition to its intrinsic value, culture provides important social and economic benefits. With improved learning and health, increased tolerance, and opportunities to come together with others, culture enhances our quality of life and increases overall well-being for both individuals and communities (Gilmore, 2014).

The human society can be understood only by understating its human culture, as the various peoples' social behaviors whether they refer to the economic, political, legal or any other area are dominated by the culture of the group. Culture is the factor which makes a difference between human groups and the lack thereof makes it impossible to understand the nature of human society. Therefore, it is very important to promote and support students' *multicultural and intercultural education* through our syllabi both within English Language classes and other university disciplines. Multiculturalism refers to the existence of several cultures in the same space and time, which express their specificities but without contamination (Rey, Plugaru, 2007). Interculturality through the word *inter* refers to a concept that leads to the thought of interaction, reciprocity, exchange, openness and solidarity.

Multicultural education comprises a set of educational strategies and materials that have been developed to help teachers with the problems created by the rapid demographic change and migration. It provides students with knowledge about the histories, cultures and contributions of various groups. It starts from the assumption that the future society is pluralistic which allows for people in it to believe in all kinds of different things and tolerate each other's beliefs even when they do not agree with each other. It draws on knowledge from many different fields, including ethnic studies, female studies, but also reinterprets the content from related academic disciplines. It encourages students to bring aspects of their cultures into the classroom and thus, allows teachers

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to support the development, intellectual, social, emotional growth of the student. Multicultural education has proven effective in promoting educational achievements among immigrant students and it is also concerned with the contribution of students to efficient social actions.

On the other hand, **intercultural education** refers to the creation of conditions in schools, the adaptation of the school to cultural diversity, to teaching students the language of the host country, and helping them to advance. Teachers will value students' cultures of origin, avoiding stereotypes, choosing a way of integration, but not assimilation. The objectives of **intercultural education** are as follows: to develop a sense of social responsibility and solidarity with disadvantaged groups and to induce respect for the equality principle in everyday behavior (Plugaru, 2007). The major generic objectives of intercultural education are: preserving and defending cultural diversity and developing the intercultural skills of citizens.

While **communication** is a fundamental tool through which people interact including, in addition to verbal language, gestures and non-verbal communication that tend to vary from culture to culture, **intercultural communication** is the ability to communicate verbally and nonverbally with individuals from other cultures so that all participants in the communication understand the messages, avoiding misinterpretations and misjudgments as much as possible.

Thereof emerges the notion of **intercultural competence**, which must be possessed by the people with good cultural education, prospective businesspeople and economists of international level, i.e., ASEM graduates. A competent person from an intercultural point of view understands the concepts of culture-specific perception, way of thinking, feeling and acting, thus assuring a more successful outcome in an international business transaction. The basic requirements of the intercultural competence are: empathy, understanding the behavior of other people, understanding their way of thinking, the ability to express a particular personal way of thinking, etc.

Interpersonal interactions have a great impact on the **cognitive system and personality**. Personality theories claim that **the human personality** is formed under the continuous influence of the social environment. The social environment in which a child grows up, puts a mark on his/her personality. Consequently, it can be believed that frequent and various changes of the social environment can reshape his/her personality in a positive or negative way. For example, a person who is trying a new food in an unwelcoming or harsh environment might perceive the food as tasting bad and might not like it in the future. Several authors (Koerner, Kohlenberg & Parker, 1996; Marshall & Barbaree, 1984; Turner & Hersen, 1981; Opre A., 2004) argue that in the case of people with personality disorders, many among their problems are essentially of interpersonal nature. Mild or severe, **interpersonal conflict** is a natural outcome of human interaction as people have very different personalities, values, expectations, and attitudes toward problem-solving, especially when they come from various cultures. When you work or interact with someone who does not share your opinions or goals, etc. there can appear conflict. Learning how to recognize and work through interpersonal conflict in productive, healthy ways is an important skill that can help us have better relationships in our working and day-to-day life. So, when we interact with others, the context in which our actions take place plays a major role in our behavior. This means that our understanding of objects, words, emotions, and social cues may differ depending on where we encounter them.

Nowadays certain cultural issues have arisen because of economic globalization. Therefore, along the **globalization** strive all around the world, as well as in the Republic of Moldova, there is an increasing need *to develop students' awareness* of all the cultural and intercultural issues it brings out. This article explains and describes the reasons why we should do so and how crucial teaching **communication across cultures** is and what issues we might face when we do not possess sufficient intercultural education.

Unfortunately, as a result of interaction between several cultures, there often appear certain interpretations of different cultures, these being **stereotypes** and **prejudices**, and subsequently **discrimination** appears, which is the behavioral expression of stereotypes and prejudices. In order

to prevent the occurrence of the above-mentioned behaviors, it is very important to assure several types of contact between different cultures such as: residential contact, occupational contact, concern for common goals and benevolent contact. It is important to carry out joint activities, academic learning in schools, social travel, hosting foreign students in local families, intercultural education, etc. (formal, informal, non-formal), (Plugaru, Pavalache, 2007).

Another type of behavior could be **permeability** and **resistance** to interpersonal contact. The human being is a cultural being and, consequently, education-proof to cultural contacts, dialogues, and influences. Openness to influence is not genetic, it is acquired through: readings, interests, preferences, values, role identifications and expectations. Therefore, in all social processes there is an influence that can be positive or negative.

In a globalized world, the right approach to cultural diversity has a great impact on the health of a society. Through globalization, cultures interfere to some degree but they cannot completely merge and they should not. Along with globalization, the **preservation of values**, the search for common values in all cultures is of fundamental importance to avoid the emergence of cognitive discrepancies between value as ideal and value as reality. There are studies that support universalist approaches, reckoning that the tendency would be to form **a single world culture**, thus making cultural entities to disappear (Cucoş, 2000). In my opinion, this trend could lead to many intercultural conflicts. Here appears **cultural pluralism** that recognizes that each culture, through its specific differences, enriches the human experience. Each culture develops its own vision through experiences gained individually (Plugaru, 2007).

The globalization process in the twentieth century gave birth to the concept of **consumerist culture** (Moles, 1980), which denoted products of poor cultural quality that did not aim to produce values and often based on certain obscure interests. Consumerist culture has developed a lot over time, thus becoming an industry. This consumerist culture is popular with individuals of a poor cultural education, without critical judgment. Due to the magnitude of the phenomenon, the new generations end up not distinguishing between authentic values and totally worthless values. Thus, these non-values are maintained, expanded and tend to reach tremendous dimensions. And if humanity or a country loses its true values, it will be extremely vulnerable to manipulation.

The problems facing modern societies affected by globalization will not be solved, as long as the solutions are sought at the level of symptom and not at the level of cause. It is necessary to make a correct diagnosis of each case, and only after there is a diagnosis, it will be possible to design an effective action plan. In many societies, the integration of individuals from various cultures is a taboo subject. Society, in a way, expects them to integrate spontaneously over time. There are two major problems, which are very serious barriers which hinder the development of a healthy intercultural society.

Problem 1: **Separation** of the individuals from another culture, which occurs extremely quickly, sometimes even in the first weeks of their entry into the new society. It is very difficult for a social group that has already gone beyond indifference and is affected by feelings of hatred to be brought back on the path of integration. The cognitive discrepancy that immigrants face increases with each passing day, because they have some expectations, desires, hopes, but the concrete reality they face is much different. The longer it takes for them to enter the host country, without doing anything concrete to bring them closer to the local population, the more difficult the integration will be. The clearest symptom of this phenomenon is that all immigrants want to get only where most of their “tribes” / relatives are. Therefore, this factor is extremely influential in the inability to integrate immigrants in the adoptive countries.

Problem 2: A second major problem that blocks the development of healthy intercultural societies can be reduced to the **lack of interest**, desire to discover another culture. Until an individual feels like doing something specific, because he/she feels that way, in vain we try to convince him/her, consciously, that this is good. His/her old “scheme” will not let him/her behave or think otherwise. Even if he/she does so, he/she will be forced by logic, which after a while will

no longer work. The children of immigrants, who grew up in an adoptive society, having the influence of that culture, even if they are more open to Western culture and consciously see it differently, however, in their subconscious there is inoculated "fear" of not becoming similar to those in Western culture. Many develop a high permeability to information from manipulators or those who have the same cognitive distortions, and at the same time, they develop total resistance to everything that comes from the culture of the adoptive society. These detected symptoms should be thought-provoking.

As the cultural issues may be as complex as described above, universities should participate in teaching culture integration in many ways—as audiences, professionals, amateurs, volunteers, and donors or investors, thus involving students in certain cultural activities and events. Our students must be ready for doing business both locally and internationally not only by mastering foreign languages, but also by mastering those intercultural competences which are required to go globally. Thus, the university should deliver certain cultural courses, programs which would help them with the cross-cultural adjustment process in their prospect jobs. And therefore, these courses should not be theoretical but have a more practical approach exhibiting cases studies with simulations, problem solving activities, etc. based on real, truthful cultural-business misunderstandings. We have to make sure that our students are ready to face the international business world, as the tendency today is towards going international and the major problem sometimes could be finding an external contact and eventually managing to become business associates where the cultural aspect should not hinder their success in work. So, the future businessperson must be ready to predict and face any cultural behaviors/misbehaviors that could prevent him/her from succeeding in business.

2. Conclusions. When doing business internationally, in addition to becoming familiar with the language and the country's rules and regulations, you will also have to adjust to the local culture. At home, you probably are not so aware of the “unwritten rules,” those day-to-day things you do which may be unfamiliar to foreigners. One example is a simple handshake. In one country, a firm handshake is standard practice, but in another country, it may be considered offensive. As with everything else, observe the locals and immerse yourself in their culture. You will eventually adjust and can even teach your new friends about your culture, but do not compete with them.

In order to build a healthy intercultural society strong collaboration and less competition are needed. As long as a competitive style at the level of societies brings division, everyone will fight for the supremacy of their own culture, but something won in battle will not bring lasting peace, nor success to your business. Everything that is imposed by force will also disappear by force and fight will always generate counter-fight!

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