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## HOW CAN DIVERSITY LEAD TO RICHER UNITY? DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCIES THROUGH “INTERITY”

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**Abstract:** In this paper, an innovative experiential teaching design, which aims to develop the intercultural competencies of students in two French Graduate Engineering Schools, is described and analysed. Using a concept called “interity”, developed by Demorgon, students are encouraged to negotiate a common frame of reference and action, creating unity from diversity. Our main objective is to use the diversity represented by cultural and disciplinary differences to produce new synergies. The intercultural competencies which emerged are analysed using the five *savoirs* developed by Byram & Zarate and Demorgon’s multiperspectivist approach. Successful elements of the teaching design are highlighted and suggestions for future improvements are given.

**Key words:** Intercultural competencies, intercultural management, diversity, “interity”, French Graduate Schools of Engineering, teaching design, experiential learning

### INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we describe and analyse an innovative experiential teaching design intended to develop the intercultural competencies of students in two French Graduate Engineering Schools, Telecom Bretagne and ENSIETA. This teaching design creates a space for negotiation, with learning conditions which enable students to gain first hand experience of the realities of diversity management (Morace & Gourvès-Hayward 2009<sup>[1]</sup>, Gourvès-Hayward & Morace 2009<sup>[2]</sup>). Using a concept called “interity”, developed by Demorgon 2002<sup>[3]</sup>, 2004<sup>[4]</sup>, 2005<sup>[5]</sup>, based on insights from the French philosopher and mathematician, Couturat 1905<sup>[6]</sup>, we encourage the students to negotiate a common frame of reference and action, creating unity from diversity. Our main objective is to use the diversity represented by cultural and disciplinary differences to produce new synergies.

Firstly, we describe the teaching design and its implementation in our particular context. The following aspects will be taken into account: student and lecturer profiles, objectives, content, teaching methods, working languages and course organisation. Secondly, we will analyse the intercultural competencies which emerged throughout the experiential learning process, using the five *savoirs* developed by Byram, Zarate et al. 1994<sup>[7]</sup> and Demorgon’s multiperspectivist approach <sup>[3][4][5]</sup>. Finally, we highlight successful elements of the teaching design and suggest future improvements.



## TEACHING DESIGN

### Intercultural competencies and “interity”

Intercultural competencies are increasingly required by both companies and institutions faced with the challenges of diversity (Gourvès-Hayward & Morace 2009)<sup>[2]</sup>. In response to these expectations, the two schools in this study introduced intercultural management into their curriculum at the beginning of the last decade. This course, which is an elective in both schools, aims to develop intercultural competencies through the exploration of the identity, alterity and diversity of both French and International students in a space called “interity”. We will first clarify these notions of intercultural competencies and “interity”, before describing our teaching design in detail.

A review of the definitions proposed by various Intercultural specialists, representing three different cultures, (Landis & Bennett (2004) <sup>[7]</sup> and Knapp & Knapp-Pottoff (1990) <sup>[8]</sup>, in Barmeyer (2000)<sup>[9]</sup> reveal a certain unity. All these authors agree that intercultural competence includes the ability to act and/or communicate in a pragmatic way in a concrete situation, including not only with individuals but with groups from different cultures. This definition presupposes the ability to act effectively in every concrete situation and to act effectively by adapting to different cultural contexts. Intercultural competencies emerge as a learning skill based on cognitive, emotional and behavioural processes. Different aspects of the context also need to be taken into account in order for intercultural competencies to be developed.

In spite of the common points of these intercultural theories, different environments and countries may also focus on different issues, such as ethics—including values like respect for minorities and diversity. The notion of intercultural competence is itself both complex and diverse and provides different possibilities for analyzing, understanding, relating to contexts and gaining knowledge about different cultures.

In order to attempt to make sense of this complexity and diversity, with the aim of achieving a form of unity, a space for negotiation of a common reference and action must be created. Following Couturat and Demorgon, we define this space as “interity” - a physical, virtual and symbolic situation in time and space between the self (*identity*) and others (*alterity/otherness*), between “I”, “you” and “he/she (Demorgon, 2007)<sup>[10]</sup>. “Interity” also represents the necessary space between two cultural groups negotiating intercultural solutions, characterized both by the interaction itself and by reflection about the situation. Individuals in a given situation are engaged in negotiation processes dealing with consensus and dissensus and, consciously or not, with the cultural dimensions described in the literature (Adler, 2002<sup>[11]</sup>, Hall, 2003<sup>[12]</sup>; Hofstede, 2001<sup>[13]</sup>, Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005<sup>[14]</sup>; Trompenaars, 1998 <sup>[15]</sup> Trompenaars & Voerman, 2009<sup>[16]</sup>). For example, each student working on a project may have the opportunity to experience “interity” when setting up a team. Along with his or her individual objectives, s/he has to negotiate project design, objectives, contents and modalities with the other members of the group. Besides this concrete and physical situation of “interity” within the group, the student will possibly have to rethink his/her own values, perceptions, representations and decisions. These interactions, both with the self and others, are necessary for “interity” to be experienced.

### Implementation of the teaching design



A two-tiered pedagogical approach which combines theory and experiential learning is used for our Intercultural Management course. In order to create “interity,” as defined above, a realistic, intercultural situation which is neither idealized nor diplomatic is set up. This approach aims to encourage emotional and cognitive learning and create synergies. Reflexivity about the learning situation and mediation is also encouraged.

After a short theoretical introduction to intercultural management concepts and methodology, students are divided into international groups. They then work on a five to eight week project, based on a case study, focusing on one or more of the cultures represented in the group, and on an analysis of their own skills as an intercultural group. They are also asked to reflect on the reality behind terms such as engineer or manager which may represent different constructions of reality in different languages. The students work both onsite and at a distance, in synchronous or asynchronous modes and use at least two working languages. Their results are presented in an interactive poster session, where lecturers and administrative staff from various cultures and disciplines are included. In this way, we wish to both simulate a situation which they may find in their future professional life and encourage metacognition about their present context. The teaching team is composed of at least two bilingual lecturers from different professional and cultural backgrounds. Each team of students also prepares a written report which includes both group and individual self-assessment.

The courses we analyse in the present article were organised during the University year 2009 to 2010, at both ENSIETA and Telecom Bretagne. Although both schools are part of the French “Grandes Ecoles” system which prepares Graduate Engineers for high level managerial and technological positions, unity and diversity are represented in different ways. In ENSIETA a wide variety of disciplines, including Hydrography, Offshore and Naval Architecture, Energetic Material and Propulsion, Automotive Engineering and Electronics and Cybernetics are covered. There is more disciplinary unity in Telecom Bretagne, where students will be working in the area of Telecommunications and Information Technology. On the other hand, Telecom Bretagne has far more diversity in terms of nationality (44% international students and 42 nationalities) compared with ENSIETA where there is a majority of French students (8% international students and 9 nationalities). ENSIETA also has a mix of military (10%) and civilian students. Both schools have a small percentage of women students (between 10% and 20%). During this particular session, the teaching team In ENSIETA was composed of 3 lecturers (British, Chinese and French) and that of Telecom Bretagne of 3 lecturers (2 British and 1 French). In ENSIETA there were 55 students of five different nationalities, with 11 women and 44 men and in Telecom Bretagne there were 60 students of 16 different nationalities with 10 women and 50 men.

The case study which was used for the project concerned an American company’s attempts to export to China and to set up a joint venture with a Chinese company, in the late nineties. Students were asked to identify, select and analyse the information in the case study, in the theoretical input of the lecture or in external sources. They could also use the American and Chinese students or lecturers in their groups, or on the campus, as informants. They developed their cultural awareness and acquired new knowledge about the American and Chinese (general and business) cultures and about intercultural management theories and their implementation. These Intercultural competencies were



displayed at two different levels. At a first, content level, they suggested practical solutions for the American manager to develop business in China. At a second, interactional level, they analysed the way they negotiated, chose and proposed solutions in/as an international team, as reflexive practitioners. At the end of the project, they analysed whether they had transformed their national or international team into a real intercultural team, while they worked on the case study. They reflected on their individual input and teamwork and wrote a joint report about their personal and group learning outcomes.

## ANALYSIS OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCIES

### Five *savoirs*

Having provided the framework to facilitate the emergence of “interity”, we chose the five *savoirs* model, developed by Byram, Zarate and others (Byram & Zarate, 1994<sup>[17]</sup>; Byram, 1997<sup>[18]</sup>; Byram, Gribkova & Starkey 2002)<sup>[19]</sup>, as a tool to analyse the intercultural competencies demonstrated by the students. Byram et al. build on the tradition of communicative foreign language teaching and focus specifically on informed communication and interaction with the other, across cultural boundaries. These *savoirs* were adopted by the Common European Framework of Reference for Language and Culture teaching, interestingly retaining the French terminology, which covers knowledge, skills and attitudes. Their use can be extended beyond language and culture teaching to provide a framework for identifying, explicating, and analysing Intercultural Competence in other contexts (Morace & Gourvès-Hayward, 2007)<sup>[1]</sup>. The five *savoirs* are defined as follows:

*Savoir-être (attitudes and values)*: Ability to see yourself as someone from another culture might see you, to question what you previously took for granted, and to accept the validity of different cultural attitudes and values. Ability to demonstrate attitudes of curiosity and openness.

*Savoirs (Knowledge)*: Knowledge of the social organisation, institutions, products and practices and expectations of one's own and other cultures. Knowledge of both the visible and invisible signs of beliefs, behaviours, values and assumptions which are learned by groups of people from different cultural backgrounds

*Savoir-faire & savoir apprendre (skills of discovery and interaction)*: Ability to acquire and demonstrate cultural knowledge and to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills.

*Savoir-comprendre (skills of interpreting and relating)*: Ability to interpret ideas, documents or events from one's own or another culture and to relate them to one's own and other's social identity.

*Savoir s'engager (critical cultural awareness)*: Ability to evaluate products, processes and practices of your own and other cultures with an open-mind in order to proceed on the basis of new perspectives (Gourvès-Hayward, Kennedy & Sudershan, 2007)<sup>[20]</sup>.

These *savoirs* provide us with the analytical categories which allow us to identify the intercultural competencies demonstrated by our students. This information will then be contextualized by the use of Demorgon's multisperspectivist model, in order to take the teaching, national and international environment into account.



## Multiperspectivist theory

Demorgon's multiperspectivist theory analyses the complexity of cognitive, emotional and behavioral processes in a given intercultural situation. This theory is based on an epistemology (Demorgon, 2004)<sup>[4]</sup>, which integrates the different perspectives provided by such diverse disciplines as biology, physics, history, sociology and psychology (Demorgon, 2002)<sup>[3]</sup>. One of the key elements of this theory is linked to the creation of culture, through what Demorgon calls "pre-adaptive opposites". For Demorgon, the concept of culture is connected to the way human beings constantly adapt to their environment, attempting to establish a long and stable relationship between their inner world (cognition, emotions, behavior) and the outer world (other people/ environment). According to Demorgon, culture – as a closing and opening system – is a chain of human activities, which are continually involved in a production process. Culture is therefore a human construct, which is deeply rooted, in a specific context and a "singular" (unique) situation, resulting from both diachronic and synchronic processes. In accordance with the principle of co-evolution, the human being can only survive if s/he both complies with the environment and transforms it at the same time.

Each (intercultural) situation offers many possibilities for what Demorgon terms "oscillation" between two or more opposites. These possibilities can be presented along a continuum, where the motivated, informed individual can choose either to adapt to them or to accommodate them.

In other words, although different cultures may prefer different tendencies or patterns, the individual who has the time and the inclination does not have to act in a culturally biased way but can choose a range of possible actions Demorgon 2002<sup>[3]</sup>, 2004<sup>[4]</sup>, 2005<sup>[5]</sup>). The minimum requirements for oscillation to take place are motivation, the necessary knowledge about the other culture and the time to adapt to the new situation. If there is no time available to gain adapted knowledge, s/he will react to a new situation with his or her own culturally biased knowledge. The notions of unity and diversity are themselves examples of such "pre-adaptive opposites" which are found in all the above disciplines. For instance, the historical tendency towards unity and centralised government in Catholic countries like France can be compared with the tendency to diversity and federalised government in Protestant countries such as Germany. The establishment of "interity" within our teaching design provides the students with opportunities for oscillation between unity and diversity.

As well as describing the process of cultural interaction and production of culture in a given situation, Demorgon's work also provides us with a useful pragmatic tool, both for consciousness raising and observation and analysis. He defines 6 perspectives from which we can describe a synchronic intercultural situation which is necessarily embedded in a specific context (Demorgon 2004)<sup>[4]</sup>. These six perspectives are: the field, levels, strategy, self-(dis)organisation and synchronic and diachronic time perspectives. The field (religious, political, economic or technological) and the levels (individual, corporate and/or national) where cultural interactions take place should be taken into consideration, in order to identify both the focus of the protagonists and the extent of their knowledge and expertise. Awareness of their culturally biased reactions could clearly facilitate teamwork with members of cultures who have different preoccupations. A distinction should also be



made between what is dependent on self-organization (or dealing with uncertainty) and what is dependent on the strategy of the different actors. Synchronic intercultural situations should also be analysed from the diachronic or time perspective, as Demorgon sees culture as an on-going process which can be changed over time through the repetition of synchronic oscillations.

## ANALYSIS OF THE STUDENTS' INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCIES

The main results in both schools revealed that the majority of students showed intercultural awareness of international, national and regional differences. They also noticed that there could be variations according to the discipline and profession (technical and non-technical). For instance, when asked to define terms such as *ingénieur* in French and at least two other languages, they were able to ascertain that the terms *ingeniero*, *engineer*, *Ingenieur*, *مهندس (mohandiss)* □□□ (*gōng chéng shī*) represent different realities in terms of education and training, function, experience or social status. By explaining these differences to their peers, students learned to decenter through negotiation, metacommunication and metacognition. They thus created a situation of "interity" (Demorgon 2004<sup>[4]</sup>, 2005<sup>[5]</sup>), where a common reference was negotiated and appropriated, albeit at varying degrees (Vygotsky, 1981<sup>[21]</sup>). Students combined this intercultural awareness with knowledge, such as the cultural dimensions defined in the literature as described above and developed intercultural skills through the tasks carried out by their teams.

"During the group class works, we came to the conclusion that working in group isn't always profitable. Even if by working by teams, we benefit from everybody's knowledge. But the main step is to find a way to manage all the ideas and then find a peaceful way to decide which ones are to keep and which ones are to reject. Trying hardly to avoid a fight caused by a disagreement can lead us to take wrong or bad decisions. What was interesting is the way everyone succeeded to give some very convincing arguments to support its ideas, which made decisions taking even harder."

(Team 3, ENSIETA – January 2010)

"To sum up our project experience, we believe that being opened to others, listening and exchanging ideas are the things that could make a multicultural team into an intercultural and successful team. We should see the big picture, and try to see the world through the other's eyes in order to understand problems better.

But above all, what we learned from this course is that it is important to get rid of prejudices or any form of preconceived ideas, because we are never dealing with a certain culture, we're always dealing with human beings that are entitled to their own identity as individuals. At the end, the team will grow stronger as an intercultural if it manages to let one's weaknesses be other's strengths and to combine the skills for the benefit of the team."

(Team 3, Telecom Bretagne - May, 2010)

An analysis of these results in terms of *savoirs* and then through the multiperspectivist approach will allow us to identify both the students' strong points and those areas that need improvement. In both schools, students show a high degree of *savoir être* displaying attitudes and values such as curiosity, empathy, respect, openness, open-mindedness and flexibility. They also show *savoir faire & savoir apprendre*, in their willingness to discover intercultural learning and to put it into operation during their team work. *Savoir comprendre* was also shown in their ability to interpret and establish links between the Western cultural dimensions from the literature and the Chinese stratagems described in the case study. The main areas for improvement for some teams concern *savoirs*, as they find it difficult to combine theory, course input and practical activities. Moreover, it seems much more difficult for them to apprehend the context in its complexity and diversity. Some of the



students are reluctant to consider to what extent it is important to collect information and acquire knowledge about the context, the history and strategies of organizations or countries at different levels. As far as theoretical input and contents are concerned, they are willing to choose models of management and intercultural management which tend to standardize and unify structures and processes at the cost of diversity. This difficulty also has repercussions on the skill of *savoir s'engager*, or critical cultural awareness. While they achieve decentring through their positive attitudes and interactive skills, they do not yet have the necessary advanced theoretical knowledge for in-depth analysis of cultural differences and similarities. However, some groups are able to create new solutions and a new unity through their diverse perspectives, as we see in the above examples.

These results are further clarified by Demorgon's multiperspectivism. For instance, their high level of *savoir être* is reflected in a preoccupation with the individual *level* and a relative neglect of the corporate and the national *level*. This is analysed from a *synchronic* perspective and little attention is paid to *diachrony*, or the impact of the past on present and future situations, with the exception of some Chinese students, who were able to place the case study in a more diachronic context. In terms of *self(dis)organisation*, the students, particularly the French students, respond well to the challenge represented by the processing of a large amount of information over a short period of time and set up structures, routines and processes, although they need some encouragement in this area. They find it difficult to identify their own *strategies* and tend to find business strategies such as those described in the case study unethical and negative. In terms of *field*, students put too much emphasis on the technological and the economic fields. They do not pay enough attention to different political systems and to different religious aspects which may have an impact on business and engineering on a daily basis. This lack of knowledge may explain some of the students' difficulties in developing critical cultural awareness.

## DISCUSSION AND PERSPECTIVES

In this article, we have shown that our teaching design makes it possible to create the conditions facilitating the emergence of "interity". Students in both schools developed intercultural competencies combining diversity and unity in a space where communication and negotiation were encouraged. On the teaching level, the experiential learning model proved successful to enable students to develop intercultural competencies which are behavioural, cognitive and emotional as well as cognitive. They were able to build synergies, using the diversity of their teams and including the contributions of international students and lecturers. The two-tiered approach, combining theory and experiential learning, was seen as positive by the students and enabled us to observe these emerging intercultural competencies. This analysis could be supplemented with the use of a self-evaluation tool, such as a multilingual and multicultural e-portfolio like the Language On-Line Portfolio Project, or LOLIPOP (Gourvès, Morace & Simpson)<sup>[18]</sup>. The use of several foreign languages to encourage metacognition and metacommunication also proved highly effective. This could be extended to the implementation of plurilinguism in the choice of working language(s) which remains dominated by French or English. We could also provide more opportunities to increase students' awareness that intercultural management deals with issues at an organisational, national and international level, which go beyond interpersonal communication and group dynamics. The presence of international students,





often perceived as a hindrance in other project groups, was seen as an asset by all the participants.

At an institutional level, as we have seen, Telecom Bretagne has voluntarily created a rich international diversity, which has long been reflected in its strategy and curricula, particularly in the Language & Culture and International Departments. The Intercultural Management course we have described is one of many initiatives to manage the diversity on the campus. ENSIETA has a long tradition of diversity in different fields of teaching and research. Their process of internationalisation of the campus, which began a decade ago, has now led to the introduction of Intercultural Management, to further develop the intercultural awareness provided by the large choice of foreign languages already available to the students. Our teaching design could serve as a model for good practice for interdisciplinary work in the Engineering schools. It could also be further developed to include staff training and to support the schools' initiatives for efficient diversity management, thus combining internationalisation, interdisciplinarity and interculturality. By providing opportunities for the negotiation of *interity*, both in and outside the classroom, we can help pave the way to a richer kind of unity.

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