

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN ENGINEERING EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Developing interpersonal skills during the engineering studies enhances the success in labs or project work. Hence, the syllabus of CDIO (3:1 and 3:2) stipulates the need to focus on team building and communication skills within it. The internationalization of engineering education adds an intercultural dimension to the skills needed, prompting Prof. Duncan Campbell (2009) to propose the adoption of the new CDIO standard – CDIO Program Internationalization and Mobility. The collaborating companies of JTH in the region have clearly called for graduates with intercultural competence, in order to find workers better equipped for their growing global markets. Their rationale is that interpersonal and team working skills within one homogeneous culture does not directly translate into an international setting. New intercultural skills are needed.

The international global mobility networks like Erasmus and others have caused a rapid increase in international student mobility over the past decade (Rexeisen, Anderson, Lawton and Hubbard, 2008). However, successful student mobility is more than logistics and practical local arrangements. Issues that need to be addressed range from understanding new world views and social codes (Samovar ed. 2007. Jandt 2009) to adapting to new values (Hofstede 1984). Particularly relevant are the problems that arise when students from polychronic cultures further their studies in monochronic cultures and vice versa. Instead of a productive exchange that enhances creativity and international understanding, which is the aim of the mobility networks, the experience often becomes frustrating, struggles with culture shock and failed studies due to misunderstandings of the educational systems. JTH seeks to address these issues by integrating intercultural training in all its education. One of JTH's efforts in this respect is the MA course "Multi-Cultural Competence", 1,5 hp, which focuses on multi cultural team building skills.

The aim of this paper is to distinguish intercultural factors that affect the team working environment for MA students at JTH. The basis for the study is eleven group essays produced by culturally mixed groups during 2009 MCC course, in which 103 students participated. One third of the students were Swedish nationals, 40% were from the Middle East or the Indian Sub Continent and the remaining from other European or non-European countries. The task given to the groups in producing the essay was formulated in the following way: *Recognize problems and factors effecting intercultural communication that you have encountered during or prior to your study at JTH. Discuss your individual responsibility in bridging the intercultural differences. Seek support for your conclusion and arguments.* Further data for the paper will be taken from the written course evaluations and interview with students. The result of the study might be a useful application of CDIO syllabus 3:1 and 3:2, where team work becomes human, no matter what associations the exterior might give

KEYWORDS

Team building, intercultural communication, multicultural competence

INTRODUCTION

A successful ME student from Pakistan stands up at the evaluation time during the last session of the course “Multi-Cultural Competence” at Jönköping School of Engineering, JTH, to give some reflections over the group work of past six weeks. He has just performed an “*ilaahi*”, a Sufi Muslim hymn, to around 100 participating students, to give a glimpse of the Pakistani culture. He stands there in his long untrimmed beard and baggy trousers with a long white *kamiis* shirt. His appearance gave associations more to a Taliban than to a tolerant academic, had it not been for his sparkling eyes under his bushy eyebrows. Referring to the challenge of working with and relating to the monochronic and reserved Swedes, he exclaims that the course and group work has helped him realize that the Swedes are human.

THE NEED

Jönköping School of Engineering (JTH), part of Jönköping University, is characterized by international dimension in all activities, an entrepreneurial spirit and cooperation with the surrounding society; driving principles in its efforts to integrate intercultural competence in all its educational programmes. The need to have this profile stems from explicit requests from collaborating companies, a desire to enhance cultural adaptation for both incoming and outgoing exchange students and the necessity for smooth team working skills among the students in the highly international Masters programmes.

JTH is located in a region of Sweden characterized by an entrepreneurial spirit and ample small and medium sized enterprises (SME), to which the university focuses its services. The university wants to assume a leading role on the European arena as regards research, development and dissemination of new technology that is geared towards strengthening the international competitiveness of SMEs. They work on a global market and need engineers with international experience, including language and intercultural skills. SMEs in Sweden generally have subcontractors or even their own production abroad and therefore seek young engineers with some form of international competence. Due to the EU's open labour market, international engineers who have studied some time in Sweden and learnt the cultural codes are also regarded as valuable assets for these companies. Having coworkers that manage life efficiently outside their cultural comfort zone become important assets for these SMEs.

JTH has a great number of partner universities around the world, and participate in programmes such as Erasmus, Nordplus, Linnaeus-Palme, Miner Field of Studies (MFS), and Tempus, which enables all types of exchange activities. Cambell (2009) points out that true benefit of student exchange takes place when there is a balance between inbound and outbound student mobility, something underscored by the Swedish International Programme Office in its directives for international exchange. JTH has therefore introduced various incentives for Swedish students who embark on an international exchange and seek partnership agreement with universities beyond the Anglo Saxon world that are good at facilitating student exchange. Around 25% of JTH graduates have consequently left their comfort zones and taken part in an exchange programme.

Practical arrangements like travel, accommodation and insurances and a short introduction at the beginning of the exchange, though important, are insufficient to make the exchange successful, that is, resulting in international and intercultural competence. Students that do not manage culture shock and withdraw into the sub-cultures of their own nationality or that of the sub-culture of international students or even abandon the program and return home have not succeeded in the delicate task of entering and becoming comfortable in a new culture. Cracking new social codes, understanding different value systems and world views

and developing a communicative language competence in the host culture need conscious and concerted efforts, primarily from the individual student, but also needs to be facilitated by the university that is involved in student exchange (CDIO Syllabus 3). JTH uses both host families and collaboration with industry to provide internship for students through its network of partner companies, thus facilitating for students to get emerged into the culture. Moreover, a course on intercultural communication running over 10 weeks is provided in which the central issues in cultural adaptation are thoroughly processed through lectures and in multicultural discussion groups.

Intercultural training is particularly relevant for the students at the two years Master programmes at JTH, as 80% of them are international students mainly from polychronic cultures studying and living in the monochronic Sweden. The education is often based in group projects where team working skills are of essence. Coming from an educational system with predominantly individual work makes the strong emphasis on group work at JTH a challenge in itself, disregarding the multicultural dimensions. This is true for both national and international students. Believing that multicultural team working provides an environment for innovation and creative thinking, JTH introduced a 1,5 credit course to enhance multicultural team working skills in line with CDIO syllable 3.1.1-3 and 3.2.1 and 6.

THE COURSE

Two months after arriving in Sweden and the commencing of the autumn term, many students start to show signs of culture shock as the Nordic darkness takes its grip of the shortening daylight. Then the masters students are offered a one week course in multicultural competence (see the course plan in the appendix), focusing on developing team working skills in their cross-cultural working environment. Three full days of lectures are given followed by a number of group sessions leading to a written group assignment where issues central to intercultural communication are processed.

The 103 students from the various masters programmes at JTH that enrolled in the 2009 course came from the following countries: Sweden 35, Pakistan 13, India 13, Iran 12, Turkey 4, Greece 3, Spain 3, Mexico 3, Bangladesh 3, Nepal 2, Germany 2, China 2, Iraq 2, and one student from Cameroon, Macedonia, Ukraine, Georgia, Nigeria and Ethiopia.

The introductory lecture was devoted to discerning factors that can interfere in the process of communication, such as value dimensions, social codes, culturally coloured non-verbal signs and world view. Vivid examples were given of communication break downs, from the turmoil around the caricatures at JyllandsPosten to innocent non-verbal signs and perceptions of different cultures view on marriage and care of the elderly – all triggering a lively but cordially discussion in the lecture hall.

In the following session, the participants were divided in 11 culturally mixed groups, which would constitute the focus of the course. An expert on group management and leadership development led the session introducing the FIRO theory - Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation (Schultz 1958) which assessment method to understand individual communication style and improved performance FIRO-B (Schnell, E. Hammer A. 2001) was used throughout the course. Even though the FIRO theory has been developed in the western monochronic cultures, its application was helpful even in the multicultural groups. The groups discussed various questions that sprung from the lectures.

One lecture was devoted to exploring value dimensions (Hofstede. 2004, Jandt. 2007, Samorva. 2007) in various cultures. The aim was to create an awareness of how values are taken for granted and projected onto other cultures as axiom. As individualism and collectivism, masculinity and femininity, high and low power distance, high and low context cultures, high and low uncertainty avoidance were explored students recognized patterns in their own culture that they had not been aware of before at the same time as they both

appreciated and reacted against values and norms of other cultures. The multicultural groups became an inspiring forum to discuss these issues that normally do not enter the agenda at a school of engineering, yet affect the working environment profoundly.

One value dimension that the students found particularly relevant was that of monochronic time-centred cultures versus polychronic people relationship centred cultures (Samovar. 2007). The monochronic cultures of Northern Europe and USA that are strongly influenced by the Protestant work ethics (Weber. 2004) treasure keeping time appointments and deadlines to the extent that it is beyond the efficiency argument to that it becomes a way of communicating social respect. The polychronic cultures, on the other hand, treasure the relationship with people where social respect is expressed through appropriate greetings and hospitality. There were two issues that staff at JTH prior to the course particularly wished should be addressed and that Swedish students also had found irritating; keeping time commitment and gender issues. The master students from polychronic cultures, on the other hand, had found the administrative staff rather nagging on the issue of coming on time, even to the extent of patronizing. They also expressed feeling ignored, even a sense of hostility from the local Swedish culture, because of the lack of courtesy greetings and hospitality. Discussing these issues in the groups removed the moralizing interpretations of each others' behaviour and brought the issue into the sphere of "showing respect" - a universal virtue with culturally bound expression. Consequently, Swedes began to warm up making efforts to greet and socialize and students from polychronic cultures found a new motivation to keep time commitments - respect.

The concept of comfort zones is central in the course, it being understood as the social setting in which a person finds familiar and behaviour predictable. Intercultural communication focuses on the responses when a person's comfort zone is either intruded by strangers or when a person leaves it to live for a period of time in unfamiliar and unpredictable territory (Samorva. 2007). When strangers meet, the normal response is uncertainty reduction, either by seeking similarities or trying to make sense of the stranger by generalizing or creating stereotypes. Ethnocentrism is another expression of the human desire for predictability where the own culture becomes the universal reference for what is culturally right and wrong. Withdrawal is another example of uncertainty reduction expressed through xenophobia, prejudice and racism. These concepts stand at the centre of the European debate on integration, showing that a university is a microcosm of the outside society.

To inspire group discussion, the participants were presented with a list of Muslim perceptions of what Christianity stands for; polytheism, militarism, immorality, drunkenness and ungodliness. Some students from traditionally Christian countries agreed that the statements contained some truth, while others, including many from Muslim cultures, objected, and rightly so, calling them generalizations, stereotypes and prejudice. The groups were then encouraged to make a list of their perceptions of what Islam stands for, making sure it did not contain any generalizations, stereotypes or prejudice. In another example of contrast that spurred group discussion, a secularized Swede and a conservative Muslim were presented by the Apostolic Creed, affirmed by most church families in the world, which the secularized Swede rejected and the Conservative Muslim by a large embraced.

One lecture focused on the, for most students, familiar experience of leaving their comfort zone and trying to adapt to a new culture. A student involved in a shorter exchange like Erasmus will probably not reach very far in adapting to the new culture, but for a student in a two years masters programme, cultural adaptation is of essence. As the different stages of cultural adaptation (Ting-Toomey. 2005) were presented (the tourism stage, rejection stage, recovery stage and the adjustment stage) many examples of symptoms were given, which students in recognition responded to. The discussions focused on recognizing signs of culture shock and come up with good advice on how to get out of it and integrate into the new culture – the ultimate objective. We agreed that strategies like avoiding the target culture

and withdrawing into the predictable sub-culture of one's own language group would do little to enhance cultural adaptation. At the centre of culture adaptation lays language learning, which should be embarked on from the first week of arrival in the country. Complaints were raised that JTH did not do enough in providing Swedish language courses, despite its commitment to the CDIO syllabus 3:3. The students were therefore encouraged to pursue individual language programmes like the LAMP method (Language Acquisition Made Practical. Brewster 1999), which brings the learner into encounter with the host cultures.

The teaching methods during the course were characterized as narrative and interactive with an emphasis on the application of theory and the processes brought about in the group work. At the end of the lecturing week in October, individual course evaluations were made by the students. The group work, though, continued with a number of sessions over a month, after which the course had a reunion in the end of November, when the group assignments also were due. Then, another course evaluation was submitted completed as a group. This material will now be presented.

THE RESULT

On the question “**How has the course met up with your expectations and the course's objective?**,” the eleven groups gave following responses:

1. *The course totally satisfied our expectations, because at the beginning we thought it would be theoretical, but now we realize it was totally practical.*
2. *We are positively surprised by the course. The outcome was higher than expected!*
3. *It's a fantastic course, beyond the expectation.*
4. *Well, the Multicultural course was so informative, especially for international students. It helped us so much practically. The main objective of the course was to give information and familiarization about different cultures and how one can adjust in new places.*
5. *Yes, it was better than expected.*
6. *Yes, we got to learn a lot about different cultures.*
7. *The expectations were exceeded by far.*
8. *While not having any expectations, the result was above expectations.*
9. *The course objectives were to get to know each others' cultures and people getting along with each other. Our expectations were to get to know people from other cultures, so the objectives and expectations are thoroughly met and consistent with each other.*
10. *It was quite satisfactory in terms of meeting out expectations.*
11. *The course was much better than our expectations. The objectives of the course were very good as they provide us the opportunity for the international students to have a close interaction with Swedes.*

On the question “**What do you think was the best with the course?**”, here are summaries of the answers from the individual course evaluations.

- Most students referred to the fact that communication between Swedes and international students had developed and improved, that walls had been broken down, “ice breakers”, that new friendships had been formed.
- Many students referred also to increased cultural understanding.

- Many students were pleased with the teachers' performance, the interactive way of teaching and the dramaturgy.
- A number of students pointed out that they saw the knowledge and skills gained from the course applicable in their future studies and profession.
- Some students expressed that they found the Swedish students very kind.
- Some had appreciated the good atmosphere.
- Some students had appreciated the understanding of culture shock.

On the question: **"What do you think needs the most improvement in the course?"** the following suggestions were given.

- Many students would have liked to see the course given directly at the beginning of the term in order to get the group process going earlier. However, some expressed the risk that the course would disappear during the information flow during the academic introduction and that it would be better to keep it a couple of months into the term when everyone has landed.
- Many students would have liked to see a longer than 1,5 credit course or that it would be spread out over a number of weeks to give more time for reflection.
- Several students pointed out that the class room environment could have been better, too crowded.
- Several students wished that the groups would have been even more culturally mixed.
- Some students wished that the project work would have been explained in a clearer way.
- Some students missed the presence in the course of other JTH teachers and personnel.
- Some students called for a cultural evening with food and dance.

Here is further statistics on the response of students to evaluation questions, where one stand for low and seven for high.

DO YOU THINK THAT THE TEACHING GOALS WERE MET?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
0,00%	0,00%	0,00%	8,00%	18,00%	44,00%	30,00%

DO YOU THINK THAT THE COURSE WAS RELEVANT TO YOUR PROGRAMME?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2,00%	1,00%	3,00%	6,00%	24,00%	24,00%	40,00%

TO WHAT EXTENT HAS RELEVANT DISCUSSION OCCURRED DURING LECTURES?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
0,00%	1,00%	0,00%	4,00%	11,00%	26,00%	58,00%

HOW DO YOU THINK THE COURSE AS A WHOLE HAS BEEN?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
0,00%	0,00%	0,00%	2,00%	16,00%	33,00%	49,00%

The different groups provided minutes after each session as a help to structure their discussions. Their main task, though, was to write an inductive academic paper together in response to the following question; *Recognize problems and factors effecting intercultural communication that you have encountered during or prior to your study at JTH. Discuss your individual responsibility in bridging the intercultural differences. Seek support for your conclusion and arguments.*

In order to show what intercultural issues the masters students at JTH find important, a short abstract of each paper will be given here.

Group 1.

The paper deals with the different view on femininity, time and greetings between the Swedish and the Eastern cultures and concludes with the following statement; *“When we realize that the people of the other culture are also humans, no matter how different their culture is from our own, adaptation challenges decrease to some extent. Like all humans, they also are curious about new things like cultures or people. Recognizing this curiosity, individuals can be encouraged to make efforts on socializing with new cultures. The awareness of this two sided curiosity can reduce the strains of the adaptation phase and effects of culture shock.”*

Group 2

After discussing language barriers and differences in the Swedish educational system compared to their own, the group reflects over the process of the group discussions in this way; *“As international and Swedish students, taking the Multicultural Competence course was such an extraordinary experience for us. At first, everyone was excited when the groups were constructed because it was the first important multicultural environment for most of us. After, getting to know each other, everyone became more and more relaxed and talkative. Learning new things about other cultures and listening people's opinions about our cultures was excellent. When we started to know each other, the speeches became more sincere. With the help of sincere conversations, we have discovered the problems that we had faced in the communication process before.”*

Group 3

The group consisting of four nationalities compared issues relating to prejudice and the hardship of creating new relationships in Sweden. They came up with the following advise to

the administration; *“Since people from different nationalities tends to work in groups by their ‘own kind’ we think that the teachers at the school could make groups with mixed nationalities when for example the class is having a laboratory session. This forces the different nationalities to learn to know each other and work with each other. This also helps the international students to learn more about the Swedish culture and the Swedish way of living.”*

Group 4

Exclaiming that it is hard to meet and interact with people from other cultures, the essay exemplify the anxiety in this way; *“For example when foreign students come to Sweden, they face with a problem that every Swedish people behave with them with an obvious fearful prejudice. It happens even between foreign students and their Swedish classmates. The Swedish students gather in closer groups like a colony and hesitate to let foreigners to enter this colony. Maybe we can say that this unkind manner is natural and it is because of lack of information, uncertainty and anxiety of Swedes of foreign students.*

Interestingly we can see that the other students who came from other cultures, not Sweden become friends earlier. They have closer relationships. Perhaps it is because of their more similar situation of life. Foreign students are out their comfort zones, but Swedish students are not in this situation. This big difference results consequences of different feelings and concerns. Inconceivably the foreign students feel a hidden type of anxiety about the Swedes because they are aware of this difference. Therefore they have tendency to keep distances with Swedes even if rarely they face with Swedes hospitality.”

Group 5

Analyzing the Swedish comfort zone, the group shares this observation; *“One of the problems international students faced in Sweden is that they found the Swedes being more to themselves (too reserved), they always want their space and they exhibit this character everywhere you find them; in the busses, in the bus station, on the street, in the library etc. This attitude made it difficult to start up a conversation with them in any public place thus making it difficult to communicate with them at all. We also noticed that the Swedes will try as much as possible to put a stop to the conversation by giving excuses of some kind. We once had a stereotyped feeling that the Swedes are like the weather (unpredictable), not friendly people and does not like to mingle with foreigners. Although this impression was disproved when we eventually got acquainted to one of them and found that they are really nice people to live with if you only are able to brake the barrier they place before you.”*

Group 6

After presenting a list of problem when arriving in a new country, the essay reflects over the attitude and responsibility to close the gaps; *“Accepting other cultures is not necessarily the same as understanding them We don’t need to fully understand them, and our mind should remain open to achieve the goal of decreasing the natural gap. By just accepting them, in long term they also will accept us. In this intercultural ‘collision’ where the guest has more responsibility than the host itself, this is because the host is not expecting to meet a different culture (is not mentally prepared) and this is easy to understand. For this reason in some cases, the guest should carry all the responsibility in this topic in order to also get the host interested.*

All this means that the guest has more collaboration in the responsibility, and this is to accept other point of views and other ways of living. Also being proactive, open our minds and be predisposed to give more effort to get the main objective, which is bridging multicultural communication in a foreign social environment.”

Group 7

This group expressed in this way the common struggle to formulate a problem; *“The idea of multicultural competency and consequent challenges can be studied from different perspectives. Regarding the issue, we all have deeply experienced far beyond what we had been expecting before. As we shared our perceptions and impressions we found that we are dealing with a highly complicated issue, so that it was almost impossible for us to formulate the problem. We were constantly coming up with different parameters which were quite interrelated. For instance language, cost of living, gender and many other influencing elements.”*

Group 8

This essay brings up a number of differences between educational systems and gives this example; *“India is huge diversified country with a population around 1 billion which is nearly 100 times the population of Sweden. This proportion can explain blindly the competence level an average Indian faces to mark his identity in a bundle of students. Due to such conditions all the Indians habituated to more theoretical approach towards the problem and their studies. When they get into Swedish educational system they find it really hard to transform and get it into Swedish educational which has more analytical approach towards. This gap of understanding makes Swedish unable to understand the actions of international students and in particular the Indians. Even though Indians come from a different system they really want to be into the newer system as soon as possible. In this course even Indians find it hard to mingle with the Swedish people as they tend to be they are very much reserved. Indians who respect their Swedish counterpart privacy and reservedness do not bother about stepping into a conversation with a Swedish. This makes a deep crater for the case that the prejudice actually happens but in real they are only virtual form of misunderstandings and nothing more than that.”*

Group 9

Discussing the role of body language in the intercultural context, the essay gives this relevant example; *“In some parts of India it’s considered rude to look directly at your parents- who you deeply respect- in the eyes at the same time you are speaking. And at the same time this in Sweden would be considered as a lack of respect, we should look each other in the eyes during a conversation to show respect and to acknowledge that you are paying attention.”*

Group 10

After discussing intercultural encounters both on and off campus, the essay give the following concluding reflection; *“This course and the group work that has been a big part of it has not only brought us extensive new knowledge and understanding about new cultures, it has also been a big part in the creation of new friends from all over the world. This is probably one of the biggest reasons for the overall positive attitude towards the course as whole. By active listening to and understanding other cultures, traditions and values, we have all learned a new way of seeing people. Further, we have also learned to avoid stereotyping, effective communicating with a friendly approach and how to respect others without culture shock.”*

Group 11

This essay reflects over the role of media in creating stereotypes about other cultures. Skilfully, the essay compares the different countries represented in the group and arrive at this conclusion; *“After hearing about each other’s media views from their home countries we have as a group been able to conclude that media just gives a view of the world that they can sell. There seems to be a problem all over the world. Official media revolve around the governmental policies and the private media is being controlled by the owners whom*

interested in raising their profits. This affects our view of the world outside; even if the media shows a true picture, it therefore doesn't necessarily show a balanced picture. It rarely shows both sides of the coin. This gives us a one-sided picture that easily can make us create stereotypes about people from different cultures, which in turn can lead to prejudice."

CONCLUSION

When the steering committee for the Masters programmes at JTH met four years ago to discuss the introduction of a course on multicultural competence, there were some reservations raised if it would be worth sacrificing a week of the master programme's precious course work on this soft knowledge that actually belongs somewhere else than in a school of engineering. With the result in hand and after the evaluation of three consecutive courses, the time investment in intercultural training at JTH has proven well spent, resulting in a more harmonious and human study environment, in line with the CDIO emphasis on a holistic engineering education.

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Multi-Cultural Competence (Mångkulturell kompetens) 1.5hp TMÅA17

COURSE PLAN

Level: Grund **Classification :** G2F **Area:** SA

Main subject: ÖÄA **SCB-level:** A **Revision date:** 2007-10-04

Objectives

The aim of the course is to train national and international students in the basics of intercultural communication that leads to multi-cultural competence and personal long lasting friendship.

Contents

Communication and culture, worldview, ethnocentrism, egocentrism, be a likeable person, avoid stereotyping, cultural values, language and non-verbal communication, the cross-cultural adaptation process, becoming interculturally competent.

Learning outcome

On completion of the course, the student should be able to:

- Define and recognize cultural factors that affect the communication process.
- Show understanding of the sociological and psychological signs a person goes through during the adaptation to a new culture.
- Reflect over the process of becoming interculturally competent.
- Develop skills in team working with colleges from other cultures.
- Take personal responsibility for becoming a raw model in intercultural contacts.

Prerequisites/Qualifications

Registered in a JTH Masters Programme.

Teaching methods

Lectures, structured discussions in multi-culture groups with written and oral reports, seminar around written assignments. Teaching language: English

Examination and Grades

Examination 1,5 hp. Written assignment. Active attendance at lectures, work-shops and seminar. ECTS grades alt. fail, 3, 4, 5

Literature

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