Building Bridges: Enabling Intercultural Competences within Double Degree Programs

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Abstract

In today's globalised world intercultural competences (IC) are central in increasing understanding and improving relations across cultures. Institutions of Higher Education (HE) face a great challenge in having to prepare students to live and work in the global arena and yet, little knowledge exists about which measures can foster intercultural competences. Literature suggests that studying abroad is not sufficient and that the development of students' intercultural sensitivity should be better supported and organized. Thus, we have focused our attention on double degree programs, with particular reference to two issues: (1) how do students enrolled in double-degree programs develop IC? (2) How should double degree programs be structured in order to facilitate the development of IC? Building on our previous research, this paper aims to assess the development of students along the intercultural sensitivity continuum of the Bennett's Developmental Model of intercultural sensitivity (DMIS) (Bennett 1986, 1993) at different stages of the educational path of the MAIB programme. MAIB (Master in International Business Development) is a joint double credential Master's program designed by University of Milano-Bicocca in partnership with Alliance University, India and Centennial College, Canada. The qualitative data have been collected through semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions and group discussions. We have expanded the scope of the previous study, including the experiences of the 2nd MAIB cohort students (academic year 2015-2016) who are currently completing the India-term.

Keywords: intercultural competence; internationalization; double degree program;
Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI).

Introduction

Globalization of the world's economic, political, technological, and environmental systems has resulted in the need for academic institutions to prepare graduates with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to work effectively in the global arena. We are facing rapid increases in students' international mobility. OECD (2014) has stressed the need for national tertiary education systems to approach internationalization as one of the key priorities and has identified "growing globalization" as one of the main trends that will affect financing to higher education. According to OECD (Education at a Glance, 2014), the number of international students at world level has increased from 0.8 million (1975) to 3 million (2005), to 4.3 million (2011). Such figure should exceed 5 million students within a few years. Within a few years, international mobility will interest 5 million individuals across the globe: a trend which brings universities to agree that the development of intercultural competences – or the "ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations" – is a critical skill. Furthermore, the economic crisis and budget restrictions are forcing international companies to be more demanding: companies are looking for qualified employees with international experience, at least bilinguals, and interculturally competent (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992).

This changing landscape has called for the attention of universities to invest in study abroad programs to prepare students for their life in a globalized world. All around the world, a variety of student mobility programs have developed, which range from academic stay to language courses, internships and study trips to foreign higher education institutions, summer courses, research exchange, etc. At the EU level, various programs have been recently merged into the Erasmus Plus Project which is going to finance 14.7 billion € for the 2014-2020 period (+ 40% respect to previous budget), offering to 4 million Europeans (students, teachers, youngsters) the opportunity to study and gain professional and voluntary experience abroad (Blanco, Frascaroli & Pasolini, 2015). Beyond transferring study credits and acquiring language skills, study abroad programs provide the participants with opportunities to immerse in-depth into getting an international exposure.

Although the development of intercultural competence is continuously emphasized, it is questionable how these study-abroad programs actually contribute to the students' intercultural sensitivity; in Milton Bennett's words: "every program, no matter at what level, format, or focus continues to claim that educational cross-cultural contact contributes to intercultural competence and thus to global citizenship" (2009). In this paper we will argue that, although short-term intercultural trainings can be effective in building up cultural awareness and changing individual attitudes towards other cultures (Hammer & Martin, 1992; Pruegger & Rogers, 1994), intercultural education, intercultural competence and intercultural sensitivity development have to be conceived

as a long-lasting and continuous learning process that should ideally be designed over a prolonged period (Graf, 2004).

This study originates from the idea that exposing an individual to cultural diversity is not sufficient to develop intercultural skills and is necessary to expose individuals to a continuous learning process, which elicits reflections about cultural diversity. How the development of intercultural sensitivity can be fostered and supported is an issue that needs to be further investigated. Thus, we looked at the role of double degree programs (DDP) in the development of intercultural competence with particular reference to two issues: (1) How do students enrolled in double-degree programs develop IC? (2) How should double degree programs be structured in order to facilitate the development of IC?

One of the longitudinal research studies, conducted by Vande Berg, Connor-Linton & Paige (2009) has provided significant evidence on the positive effects of teachers/trainers' pro-active interventions on intercultural learning. Taking these findings into account, it is consequently desirable to identify and apply specifically designed intervention techniques and strategies which facilitate the development of intercultural sensitivity (Anderson et al. 2006). This paper contributes to this aim by presenting MAIB - Master in International Business Development as a case in point to understand and demonstrate the holistic approach towards building intercultural sensitivity among the students. MAIB is a joint double credential Master Program between University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy, Alliance University, India and Centennial College, Canada, where students study and live in Milan, Bangalore and Toronto, across 3 different campuses in 3 global dynamic cities in the world.

1. Developing intercultural sensitivity within the MAIB program:

1.1. Intercultural competence: a definition

The importance of effective intercultural relations in both global and domestic contexts is well recognized (Brislin, Cushner, Cherie & Yong, 1986; Hammer, 1989, 1999a; Kealey, 1989). As Bhawuk & Brislin (1992) suggested, "To be effective in another culture, people must be interested in other cultures, be sensitive enough to notice cultural differences, and then also be willing to modify their behaviour as an indication of respect for the people of other cultures". In this paper we use the term "intercultural sensitivity" to refer to the ability to discriminate and experience relevant cultural differences, and we use the term "intercultural competence" to mean the ability to think and act in interculturally appropriate ways. We argue that greater intercultural sensitivity is associated with greater potential for exercising intercultural competence.

1.2. An innovative approach

MAIB has been designed as a comprehensive Master's program to support the development of intercultural sensitivity among the students. The program includes: an intensive orientation course at the start of the Italy term; a 40 hour course on cross-cultural communication followed by a 10 hour pre-departure preparation before leaving for India. Moreover, there are 3 intensive coaching sessions with a personal coach during the first 3 months of the program, followed by two on-line coaching sessions in each of the two remaining terms. During the Course on cross-cultural competencies, communication is defined as the "mutual creation of meaning" and explored as both a tactical issue of improving understanding and as a strategic issue of creating value from cultural diversity. Some attention is also given to how intercultural competences can be sustained at an organizational level in global organizations.

The pre-departure program aims at sensitizing students to Indian and Asian culture and specific characteristics (e.g. as regards history, social, politics or economics). Lectures and seminars are organized held by experts on India. The faculty of the course on Cross-cultural skills once again focused on the need for cultural learning with the objective to raise among the students a general awareness and understanding of cultural diversity in typical intercultural interactions.

During the 2nd Term of the MAIB program, the students study and live at the campus of Alliance University, Bangalore, India, and experiencing *real-life* in the host country. At the start of such term, MAIB students go through a seminar on *Socio-cultural environment in India – Understanding & appreciating differences*. They are put in touch with their Indian buddies to explore campus life and connect with the Indian students. Visits are organized to Non-government/NGOs to understand the social reality. Bangalore site seeing trips and other useful historic and cultural events are also planned, in order to foster students' awareness and understanding of Indian social and cultural traditions.

As part of the courses the students take in India, direct interface with industry is planned, in order to help them understand the work environment and get an opportunity to participate in small projects, putting theory to practice. The students are encouraged to write personal reflections on the blog. Faculty has been selected based on its competence, as well as on its sensitivity, and ability to encourage and support students in their academic and social life at the campus.

As already mentioned, the students continue their interaction with their Coach through Skype meetings. The Course Director, Coordinator and the Cross-Cultural Skills Course faculty also maintain a constant interaction with the students. The India term closes with exams, results and feedback from the students and faculty. The students thereafter move to Canada for their 3rd Term at Centennial College in Toronto.

In Canada, the students study at the Centennial College campus in Toronto and follow courses offered within the IBM program. Here too an initial detailed Orientation Program is organized by the International Department of the Centennial College and seminars are organized to give an insight into the socio-economic, cultural and political environment in Canada, particularly focused on the Ontario State. Being immersed into the IBM class, the students get to interact with Centennial students (coming from a very international background) and the International department staff helps them to settle in. All along the 14 months period the students are constantly supported by the MAIB course director and the program's coordinator.

The development of intercultural competence and thereby intercultural sensitivity is a challenging aim that calls for innovative approaches of teaching and learning. Therefore, as shared above, an innovative, learner-centred pedagogical design based on Bennett's DMIS model that combines individual and co-operative learning and applies experiential and reflective learning methods has been developed and implemented in the MAIB program. These methods have been chosen based on an intensive engagement with relevant literature, among them for example Graf (2004), whose research findings suggest that an experiential orientation supports the development of intercultural competence. At the same time DMIS model of intercultural sensitivity (Bennet 1993) helps us in analysing and measuring the development of intercultural sensitivity along the continuum.

2. Theoretical Framework

Research studies in such diverse areas as overseas effectiveness (e.g., Brislin, 1981; Cleveland, Mangone, & Adams, 1960; Kealey & Ruben, 1983; Landis & Brislin, 1983a-c; Landis & Bhaget, 1996), international management (e.g., Adler, 1991; Black, 1990; Black, Gregersen, & Mendenhall, 1992; Black & Mendenhall, 1990), international study abroad (e.g., Klineberg & Hull, 1979), and international transfer of technology and information (e.g., Hawes & Kealey, 1979, 1981; Kealey, 1996) have identified intercultural competence as central in increasing understanding and improving relations across cultures (Bennett, 1993a, b; Hammer, 1999b). Additional research on domestic intercultural relations (contact across forms of ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, etc.) has found a similar key role for intercultural competence (e.g., Gardenswartz & Rowe, 1993).

While cross-cultural research has posited the importance of intercultural competence in both global and domestic contexts, work by Bennett (1986, 1993b) has additionally suggested the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), an underlying theoretical framework, useful for conceptualizing intercultural sensitivity and competence.
The DMIS model (Bennett 1986, 1993) of intercultural sensitivity proposes that individuals can be

positioned along a continuum, characterized by different stages or orientations, ranging from ethnocentric perspectives towards more ethnorelative perspectives.

Fig. 1
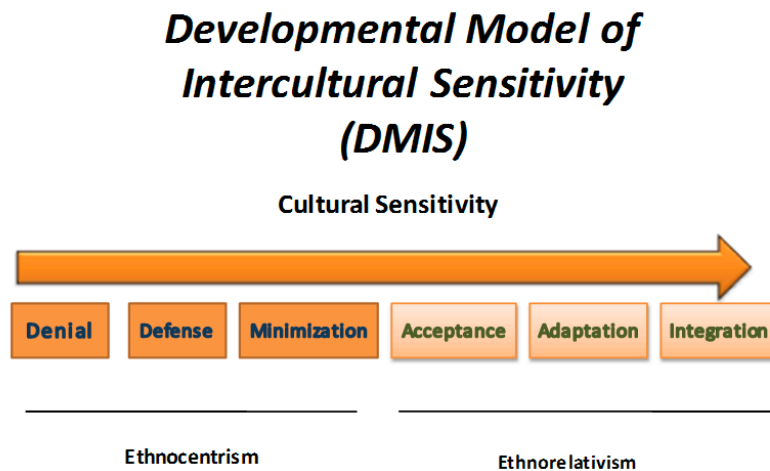
As figure 1 indicates, the DMIS includes six stages, ranging from an ethnocentric orientation – that views the world through one's own cultural experience – towards an ethnorelative orientation, which takes into account multiple perspectives, adding to one's own views of the world also others' cultural perspectives. Three stages are identified for both orientations: for Ethnocentrism: Denial, Defense, and Minimization. Individuals in the Denial stage are unable to discriminate between various cultural differences and often miss cultural cues that suggest an underlying cultural relevance to different behaviours and communication patterns. The three stages within ethnorelativism are Acceptance, Adaptation, and Integration of difference.

We chose DMIS as theoretical framework for several reasons. First, it is a theoretically based measure sought to assess the impact of the study abroad experience on the intercultural sensitivity of students. Second, it has undergone extensive psychometric testing and is a reliable and valid measure (Hammer, Bennett, and Wiseman, 2003). Third, an established research literature base has developed over time, illustrating its use (Paige, 2003). On the basis of its grounding in theory, its empirical reliability and validity, and the fit with our program goals, DMIS deemed a good choice for measuring students' intercultural sensitivity.

This theoretical framework has provided us the conceptual guidance in program planning for

the **MAIB Master Course** in order to explore the cultural journey of our students living and studying in Milan (Italy, Europe), Bangalore (India, Asia), and Toronto (Canada, North America). Our objective is to assess the development of our students along the intercultural sensitivity continuum.

3. Methods

This study investigates the role of double degree programs (DDP) in the development of intercultural competence with particular reference to two issues: (1) how do students enrolled in double-degree programs develop IC? (2) How should double degree programs be structured in order to facilitate the development of IC? In order to answer these questions, we base our analysis on data that was collected at the end of the India term during the first two editions of the Master: academic years 2014-2015 and 2015-2016. The respondents from the MAIB second edition (2015-2016) are six: 4 females and 2 male from different nationalities (India, Italy, Jamaica, Russia, Romania, Mexico). The new data have been integrated with data which was collected in a previous research and presented at the annual international interdisciplinary conference (AIIC 2015) in Portugal. In the previous study we discussed how the 1st MAIB cohort had approached intercultural learning during the Italy and India terms.

What emerged was that the MAIB program had a positive impact on the development of the students' intercultural competence. The data were collected through qualitative interviews with nine students (3 to 6 person and on Skype) and focus groups. The interviewees were students from Italy, Mexico, Brazil, China and the United States at the end of their period in India in April 2015. In the first study, preliminary and follow-up interviews were conducted at the beginning and the end of the period in India. Particular attention was given to the subjective experiences and re-elaborations of the students.

In order to gain a better understanding of the perspectives and perceptions of individuals exposed to cultural diversity we chose a mainly qualitative approach. The aim of the current study is to understand the main factors contributing (or hindering) the development of inter-cultural sensitivity among students and expand the scope of our previous research using a comparative approach. Data were collected through semi-structured qualitative interviews and open-ended questionnaires conducted in person or on Skype. Such an approach seemed more flexible as it allowed respondents to use their own words and concepts. The interview guidelines developed to identify and measure:

1. The student's development of intercultural competence and sensitivity;
2. The creation of value from cultural diversity in new and challenging contexts;

3. How the students approach culture-related difficulties.

The interviews were recorded and later transcribed, coded and interpreted. Although the sample used is not statistically relevant, it significantly contributes to the understanding of how individuals are affected by external circumstances and adjust their behaviour before they reach a greater awareness and enjoyment of cultural diversity. Thus, this study assesses the development of intercultural sensitivity during different phases of the course, based on the development model of intercultural sensitivity (DMIS) theorized by Bennett (1986, 1993).

4. Findings

During the interviews, students from batch 1 expressed strong emotions and vivid memories when talking about their experiences abroad; this can be attributed to the fact that the interviews were conducted shortly after the end of the period in India when the memory of experiences was still very recent. In addition, Whalen (2009) noted that the experiences abroad have a particularly strong impact on student's emotional state. When describing their arrival in India, (non-Indian) students reported a sense of confusion, remembering the traffic, the chaos, new smells and the vivid colours. It is pertinent to that students from batch 1 had started the India term with an enthusiastic and optimistic attitude, but later had experienced difficulties in adjusting. They struggled with adapting to the new environment; for example, lower levels of cleanliness in the campus' accommodation, the quality of the food served in the cafeteria on campus was defined poor in comparison to the Italian students' standards. Thus, at the beginning of the period in India, most of the non-Indian students were in a state of denial and showed a strongly ethnocentric orientation where "one's own culture is central to reality" (Bennett, 1993).

After various interventions from the coach, the program director and coordinator they slowly began to perceive and understand cultural differences in more observable areas of human behaviour (e.g. clothing, food, music, art, dance), and then to move to more subtle arenas (e.g. nonverbal behaviour, customs, dos and taboos). By the 2nd month of their stay in India, the students had moved toward the Minimization stage. Minimization is not monocultural in its capability, yet it is also not fully intercultural in its recognition of deeper patterns of cultural difference and the ability to appropriately respond to these differences (Bennett, 2004; Hammer, 2009)

In comparison with the Italian students, Mexican and Brazilian students had a relatively positive experience in "breaking the ice" with the new context; they started from the point of Minimization and experienced a certain degree of success in relating with peers in India and navigating their way through unfamiliar cultural practices. These students were able to identify commonalities, which helped to align better with the host country. At the same time they were very

conscious of cultural differences. With support and inputs from the coach and the staff they were better able to appreciate diversity and were drawn upon to bridge different cultural practices.

Towards the end of the 3rd month, most students reflected a more acceptance-oriented mindset; they made local friends and showed a strong curiosity about different culture. However, they reported having encountered some difficulties in adopting an appropriate behaviour when confronted with cultural differences with their peers and the teaching staff. To sum up, all the students from batch 1 reduced their ethnocentric tendencies.

In comparison with the first cohort, the initial experience in India was perceived as less difficult by the students of the 2nd cohort. They reported that they struggled initially to adjust to the new environment because of their needs and habits (e.g. it was difficult to initially adjust to the food) but coped easily to the situation. All students considered the host country (both in the case of Italy and India) generally very hospitable and did not particularly encountered problems in living abroad, except for the initial feeling of estrangement. The difference between the 1st batch and 2nd batch students can be explained by considering that the students from the first edition had had little interaction with other cultural groups before starting the Master and were therefore more inclined to use stereotypes and generalizations toward the *other*. Although students from the second edition faced some challenges in dealing with culturally sensitive issues with teachers and other groups, they generally achieved a greater awareness of their difficulties after concluding the India term:

> *When dealing with businessmen and the professors, I think I should have phrased sentences in a less direct way and paid more attention to cultural aspects such as talking about religion in a sensitive way or criticizing how they work* (Student, private conversation, May 2016).

Interviewees reported that some unexpected positive events contributed to change some of their biases and prejudices - related to an initial more ethnocentric attitude. A respondent shared that she completely changed her negative opinion about the hygienic conditions and quality of Indian hospitals the morning she was forced to go to the hospital in the city of Bangalore due to a sudden eye pain. Although the idea was "frightening" the student was positively surprised:

> *I was really surprised to find out that hospitals are almost better than here. It was a good experience, they kept me only a couple of hours* (Student, private conversation, May 2016).

This shows how small episodes can permanently shape one's perceptions and ideas about a relatively unknown context, culture or person.

Students were asked to define the concept of culture and intercultural competence: all of them were able to provide articulated definitions. As previously said, during the period in Italy students followed a course of intercultural communication for business. In the course, culture was

described as "the mutual creation of meaning" and was addressed as a strategic element to create added value from cultural diversity.

Nonetheless the interviews conducted with the students from batch 2 highlighted a gap between theory and practice: respondents said they encountered significant difficulties during the teamwork and attributed these difficulties to cultural issues. Students from batch 2 had more difficulties in the interpersonal area compared to students from batch 1. Some of the respondents even spoke about "cultural incompatibility" referring exclusively at the professional level: "working together was really mentally draining". For example, different ideas of what working together means lead to many misunderstandings and tensions in the class.

I think that in a multi-cultural class is very difficult to understand each other, you have a lot of pressure on you because you have to make people understand your point of view without offending them (Student, private conversation, May 2016).

In light of the said difficulties which was mostly related to group-work assignments and that constitutes a fundamental feature of the program, we asked students what they thought the problem was and what were the possible solutions. Two of the students reported that the intercultural communications course had not trained them to solve culture related interpersonal issues. However, the course laid the foundation for more sophisticated and nuanced reflections on cultural issues, proving the idea that experience is effective only when supported by intercultural education. The differences in language, food, customs and practices that elicited an initial feeling of discomfort and inadequacy, later became positive markers of a new experience. A student highlighted how important is to be aware of the processes involved in the development of intercultural communication because this awareness allows one to recognize some mechanisms and patterns that help dealing with disfunctional environment.

The Italy and India terms, although perceived as challenging (mainly because of group dynamics), were both described in positive terms by the respondents. After about a month, the students from batch 2 had shifted from acceptance to adaptation: such stage entails the ability to identify how culture affects a wide range of human experience and the use of a framework for organizing observations of cultural difference. In other word, they acquired the ability to adopt different behavioural patterns. 80% of the respondents reported constructive reflections about their cross-cultural interactions, describing diversity as a factor that can increase mutual interests and add value to an international group. In this view, differences become interesting and stimulating. Two respondents noticed that Indian society seems to be characterized by a more collective dimension in comparison to the individualistic dimension of the Western model.

Overall, there are more positive occurrences in the interviews than negative ones: the experiences described focusing more on the hospitality of the host country and the locals rather than on the challenges encountered when working together as a group. This indicates a positive inclination and the willingness to highlight the constructive aspects of the experience. Consequently, communication emerged as a key tool: you have to make yourself understood, and this can be done effectively only by really taking into account the other person's values system.

> *Trying to shape them and compete fiercely within the group is just pointless and stressful. Instead, we must think forward and show the best of what we are, this impressions will be for life not just for a project* (Student, private conversation, May 2016).

We believe it is important to highlight that an intercultural group studying together becomes an interconnected system and that communication and openness are the key features binding the group together. Our analysis reveals that the MAIB students had acquired the awareness of being part of an interconnected system.

> *I believe it's essential for everyone to understand that we are connected, we are interdependent on one another, not just at a personal level. If we want to understand globalization we must know what is behind it, and there are a number of countries, people, and cultures with different attributes, all of them valuable for our lives in an indirect way* (Student, private conversation, May 2016).

Conclusions

In light of the global environment of the twenty-first century, Universities increasingly foster opportunities promote intercultural competence among students, irrespective of whether these students travel outside their home city, region, or country (Levin, 2002; Otten, 2003; Raby, 1996). Of particular note are increasing demographic changes in the world that make international and intercultural competence essential for our students.

The paper provided a scope for understanding and envisioning the need and scope for the study abroad programs. First, the assessment of student learning that result from the MAIB program provides useful insights for the Universities. Second, the same could enhance awareness of the educational value of study abroad with the aim of showing how it promotes acquisition of intercultural competence in students.

One of the desired outcomes of MAIB, as an international Master program, is to foster an intercultural mind-set amongst the students. Intercultural competence is a key goal of internationalization because it indicates awareness and understanding of culturally diverse others

and situations, as well as the presence of behaviours that promote productive and effective communication among and across cultures.

This paper has explored how the MAIB – joint Master program has enhanced the efforts towards internationalization of education, focusing on development of intercultural competence amongst the MAIB students.

Through our experience with the MAIB program, working with students and faculty, we would like to expand the scope of our research by administering the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), which has its theoretical basis in DMIS. It is a fifty-item instrument that measures an individual's worldview toward cultural difference. The same shall render the measurement of intercultural competence more scientific and accurate. Since the research is focused on intercultural learning across the Italy and India terms, we shall be sharing the final findings at the end of the Master program after the students have experienced also the Canada term. Nonetheless, current research has shown that MAIB Master program has positively affected student learning and development of students' intercultural competence.

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