

Cultural and Intercultural “Competence”: Contrasting Approaches to Teaching and Assessing Cross-Cultural Skills

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One of the strengths of anthropology is its attention to nuance, complexity, contingency, and the immense variability of human cultural forms. When asked to teach students how to cross cultures, most anthropologists emphasize precisely these—teaching about cultural difference in ways intended to avoid oversimplification and superficial understandings, by reading fine-grained ethnographies, for example. In contrast, intercultural communication relies heavily on strategic simplification in its theory and pedagogy, for example, teaching about contrasting cultural values such as collectivism versus individualism and making broad generalizations about where each is found. In this paper, I explore how these two distinct approaches differently support the development of intercultural and cultural competencies.

The last decade has seen an explosion in the number of schools and universities adopting cultural competence or intercultural competence as a primary learning objective. While the two are often used interchangeably, this conflation erases an important distinction. In this paper, I explore the difference between cultural and intercultural competence by engaging the productive tensions that exists between two contrasting approaches to teaching cross-cultural skills. The first of these approaches is typical of anthropology. The second, dominant in the field of international education, is that of intercultural communication. I outline key characteristics of each approach, with attention to core assumptions, goals, and methods, as well as unintended consequences and implications for assessment. This paper draws upon years of immersion—as both student and teacher—in both types of courses. I argue that the two approaches are complementary, reflecting tensions inherent in any generalized quest to teach others how to cross cultural boundaries and experientially discover the “unexpected designs that defy imposed structures and classifications.”