

Can We Talk?

Helping Students Develop Cognitive Skills That Facilitate Biculturalism and Entrepreneurial Innovation

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Internationalization in higher education increases opportunities for exposure to cultures other than one's primary way of life for domestic and overseas students. Research has established the benefits of diversity for improving team performance (Jones et al. 2020). Business firms are documenting the role of internationalization in innovation performance improvements (Du et al., 2022). At the individual level, there is evidence in the literature that multicultural experience promotes creativity if it provides opportunities for new perspectives, challenges existing knowledge structures, and fosters the integration of multiple perspectives into a coherent whole (Tadmor et al., 2012). Notably, for students preparing for entrepreneurial careers, the beneficial influence of cultural diversity on cognitive skills required for success in new business enterprise - such as creativity, problem-solving and innovation - is being further tested and documented. How can tertiary educators help students develop and leverage the skills required to navigate multiple cultures and then apply those skills to new ventures in the business world?

Innovation and risk-taking for profit in business requires individuals to manage uncertainty and integrate sometimes competing values and priorities. Students engaged in international education face the same challenges.

Business school educators can turn to established pedagogies to facilitate their students' development of competencies that will help them succeed in new cultural environments and will also serve them in entrepreneurial pursuits.

Most notably, experience-based learning that emphasizes cognitive integration of new and old perspectives can help students navigate multicultural experiences and succeed in subsequent professional pursuits. At its core, this pedagogy requires rich conversations that lead to deeper understanding and effective transfer of learning.

Krathwohl's (2002) revision of Bloom's taxonomy puts a spotlight on advanced cognition, reframing original categories in terms of six Cognitive Processes: Remember, Understand, Create, Apply, Analyze, and Evaluate. This rendering of educational goals, objectives, and standards is nicely aligned with Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT). While ELT puts experience at the center of learning, it includes cognitive processes that lead to deep understanding and the application of that insight to evaluate and improve learning.

Each of the four steps in the cycle of experiential learning - Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Active Experimentation - are required for effective learning. The process loses potency if you ignore any of the steps or leave it to students to take themselves through the cycle. This is where well-intentioned educators can easily slip up.

Even practitioners of Organization Development, where ELT is a touchstone for professional development with individuals and teams, can fall short on facilitating discussions that lead students through the cognitive processes that integrate new learning with previous understanding. Educators are adept at designing concrete experiences that set up opportunities to process new learning. Simulations, case studies, exercises designed to leverage group dynamics, internships, etc. hold potential to lead to learning beyond the concrete knowledge and skills of the experience. But that potential can only be realized by diligently completing the entire integrative cycle.

Similarly, there is ample evidence that simple exposure to multiple cultures is not enough to result in improvements in creativity or innovation. International students take different approaches to managing competing cultural milieus. Berry (1997) identified four types of acculturation strategies: Separation, Assimilation, Marginalization, and Integration. Only the Integration strategy includes identification with both the original and the new culture. Establishing cultural identity from both home and foreign cultures requires the most adaptation and resolution of conflicting ideas. Tadmor et al (2012) use the term Biculturalism synonymously with Integration and argue the greater integrative complexity of “Biculturals” leads to success in creative and professional domains.

The reflective and conceptual aspects of learning are too often shortchanged, minimizing the potential learning that could arise with a more rigorous application of the complete experiential learning cycle.

We can do more than strategic group formation to mix international and domestic students. More than social events to experience diverse cultural foods, arts, rituals, etc. As educators, we must maintain the discipline to follow-through after hands-on learning with reflective discourse and abstract conceptualization. We need to talk to our students – preferably in peer groups - about how these skills relieve the tension of competing cultural values and practices, and support innovation skills by recognizing and understanding the transferability of multicultural skills.

Baker et.al. (2005) provide a framework for conversation as experiential learning, identifying process dialectics that encourage learners to embrace the differences and contradictions between reflection and action; individuality and relationality; status and solidarity, etc. Insight comes with structured and intentional reflective discourse and discussions that conceptualize the application of learning through abstract thinking that creates tension with accepted models of understanding. Learners construct meaning from experience and their new ways of thinking and behaving can then be tested and further refined.

Developing the skills of potential entrepreneurs in a business school setting may be supported using pedagogical techniques that are known to address advanced cognition, such as experiential learning models that highlight reflective discourse and abstract conceptualization, as key steps in developing multicultural competencies, including problem solving, creativity, and innovation.

If we embed these teaching approaches in classroom work, going beyond strategic team formation and encouragement of autonomous interactions among international and domestic students, HE educators can be skilled facilitators of bicultural development, and business students can benefit from the simultaneous development of advanced cognitive skills that serve entrepreneurial aspirations.

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