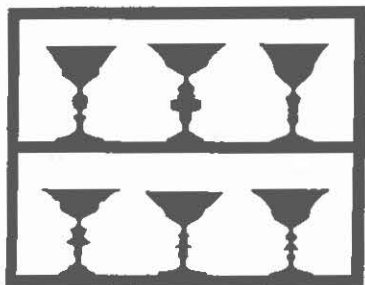


Internationalizing Student Life: Developing Global Competency Skills

Nancy Mark



You may see goblets or portraits in this perceptual exercise of Zeke Berman entitled "Faces or Vases?".¹ After a few seconds most people can see both, but often only with assistance from another person. Similarly, developing global competency skills includes the ability to shift one's perceptual framework in order to allow the existence of additional realities. Most of us need assistance in this shifting process. According to Singer:²

"It is not the stimulus itself that produces specific human reactions and/or actions but rather how the stimulus is perceived by the individual that matters most for human behavior. It is perhaps the most basic law of human behavior that people act or react on the basis of the way in which they perceive the external world."

The need for the U.S. educational system to address and prepare students for an increasingly interdependent planet has never been greater. The demographic changes in the U.S. along with our growing interdependence with nations around the world provide great challenges for those of us in higher education who wish to assist students in preparing for their future in this new world. Arthur Levine³ cites international events (the end of the Cold War and the Persian Gulf War) as two of the five social or political events that students on 26 campuses believe have most influenced their generation.

In the following paragraphs, I will describe the development of a Student Affairs and Services program at Michigan State University which was created to provide global competency skills at the co-curricular level for undergraduates. Then, I will describe some specific programs and activities of the office and conclude with the challenges and opportunities of developing such a program.

Background

Michigan State University, long a leader in international education in the areas of teaching and research, has taken up the challenge of providing its students with opportunities to expand their perceptions of the world outside the U.S.

In 1990, the Office of Internationalizing Student Life (ISL) was created under the leadership of the Vice President for Student Affairs and Services at Michigan State University (MSU). The development of the office was preceded by the work of a unique Task Force that utilized the expertise of individuals not only in Student Affairs and Services, but those in the academic arenas, including representatives from various Area Studies Centers on the MSU campus and representatives from the International Studies and Programs unit.

In 1988, the Task Force was exploring the possibility of an office such as ISL at the same time that MSU was undertaking a comprehensive review of undergraduate education. The report of this review entitled "Council for the Review of Undergraduate Education" (CRUE),⁴ asserted that MSU should aim to "graduate individuals with knowledge, skills and habits of mind that will enable them to contribute effectively and ethically in an increasingly interdependent world and with the imagination, motivation, feeling and spirit necessary for a life of learning beyond the formal classroom." Thus, at the time that ISL was conceived on the MSU campus, many forces were converging towards the agreement that preparing students for their lives in a global community was a critical and important responsibility of the University.

Goals and Organization

As a co-curricular, programming and consultative unit, ISL has two major goals. It seeks to provide opportunities for students to learn about the variety of cultures which co-exist in the contemporary global environment and the social, political, economic and cultural forces which affect international relations. It concurrently assists students in the refinement of their interpersonal skills including cross-cultural communication deemed essential for success in their chosen careers.

ISL provides opportunities for students of widely ranging

abilities to respond to cultural differences. ISL subscribes to the Bennett Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity⁵ which suggests that individuals are at variable levels in their experience of differences. This model moves from stages of ethnocentric sensitivity to stages of ethnorelative sensitivity and is valuable to teachers, trainers and others in higher education administration because not only is it a theoretical model, but one that suggests activities and experiences designed to move learners to the next stage of development. Thus, the model allows individuals to acquire the ability to diagnose the developmental stage of the learner and to attempt to suggest learning options which are appropriate for that stage of development.

In an effort to reach and serve students at many developmental levels, ISL has fostered a large network on the MSU campus. In fact, metaphorically, ISL could be conceptualized as a bridge; a collaborative and consulting unit that has woven a tapestry rich in resources.

As a Student Affairs and Services unit, ISL works closely with others within the Division such as Career Development and Placement Services, the Counseling Center and most extensively, the Department of Residence Life. The ISL network, however, goes beyond the parameters of Student Affairs and has extended into many corners of the campus in efforts to tap human and other resources that would benefit students and staff that come to ISL searching for international programming resources. Some of the other units in this network include: the Office of International Educational Exchange (OIEEX) which houses the Office for International Students and Scholars and the Office of Overseas Study; area studies centers which include African Studies (MSU hosts the largest in the U.S.), Asian Studies, European Studies and Latin American and Caribbean Studies as well as other international units such as the International Business Center and the Center for the Advanced Study of International Development (CASID). ISL has worked closely with faculty across the campus who have international expertise in various areas. Thus, though ISL is a co-curricular unit, there is extensive contact with units in Academic Affairs.

Supported by this network, ISL has attained significant visibility at MSU. This, however, is not an easy task on a campus of over 35,000 students. Many individuals in the ISL network have assisted by speaking in a variety of forums about the need to support internationalization outside the classroom. ISL activities are mentioned in numerous newsletters, E-Mail bulletin boards and student and staff newspapers. In addition to providing publicity, these vehicles of communication help all faculty, staff and students understand what an "internationalizing" office

does and demonstrate its wide range of involvement throughout student life.

Student to Student Programming

ISL serves as a center through which students can gain skills and ideas, interact with people and become motivated to further their cultural competence. Many of MSU's 2400 international students as well as U.S. students of international origin or experience are part of ISL's student-to-student oriented programming.

One of ISL's primary partners in recruiting students to assist with programs is SAIL (Strategies to Advance the Internationalization of Learning). SAIL is a Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) housed in International Studies and Programs. SAIL's goal is to promote global and cultural awareness through the use of international and internationally experienced U.S. students as "Cultural Consultants." Currently, some 100 students (U.S. and international) representing over 40 countries volunteer as Cultural Consultants. Of this group, 65 per cent are international students, mostly graduate students, representing a wide array of majors, cultures, geographical backgrounds and areas of expertise.

The U.S. students include former Peace Corps volunteers and undergraduates who have studied overseas. Students returning from an overseas study experience have welcomed the opportunity to share their cultural knowledge and experiences with their peers. In fact, consultants not only contribute to the development and presentation of programs, but many hold other leadership positions on campus which allow them to encourage and recruit other students to request internationalizing programs. Information about Cultural Consultants is maintained in a Student Talent Bank. This facilitates matching the skills and experiences of particular Cultural Consultants with the preferences and needs of those who wish to utilize them.

SAIL consultants receive continuing training on such topics as the meaning of internationalization, articulating one's cultural knowledge, improving cross-cultural communication skills, facilitating cross-cultural discussion and responding to conflicting opinions.

Examples of student-to-student programming are found in many activities sponsored by ISL during the Persian Gulf Crisis of January-February, 1991. During that time, numerous Arab and Arab-American students funneled their anxieties and concerns about the crisis by assisting ISL in presenting a wide variety of cultural, historical and political

perspectives on the region. These efforts capitalized on the receptiveness of many U.S. students who were anxious to listen to such views. Subsequently, ISL has often utilized other world issues as platforms for advancing multiple perspectives. For example, ISL: 1) in 1992 collaborated with the African Studies Center to bring three Somali scholars to MSU to focus on dimensions of the crisis in Somalia; 2) also in 1992, initiated the visits of two Bosnian journalists currently residing in Michigan to present historical and current perspectives on the war in Bosnia; 3) and in 1993, connected the Jewish Student Union and the Arab Student Organization at MSU in their first joint program—their own Middle East Peace Talk.

Some additional examples of program initiatives to which both U.S. and international students contribute include: 1) serving as experts for discussions or presentations in classes on internationally related topics; 2) enhancing the learning of comparative international and cross-cultural phenomena during campus activities and programs; 3) helping train university staff in cross-cultural sensitivity and about issues and concerns of international students; 4) commenting on foreign news events and/or writing opinion columns for local media; 5) and serving as program assistants for presentations, dinners and other activities with an international or cross-cultural emphasis.

"Oh, No": A Sample Program

"From Oh, No to Ok: Communicating with Your International Teaching Assistant," one of ISL's programs that has gained recognition throughout the campus and country involves both U.S. and international students. The "Oh, No" refers to the response of many undergraduate students when an International Teaching Assistant (ITA) walks into class on the first day. "Oh, No" was initiated by an international student who was an ITA at MSU and reflected his desire to assist U.S. students in communicating effectively with ITAs.

Mary Bresnahan and Min Sung Kim⁶ who have studied the U.S. student/ITA relationship have found U.S. students to be on a continuum ranging from those negatively disposed to those positively disposed to their ITAs. Their findings show that students at the center of the continuum are highly responsive to the information they receive about ITAs prior to entering the classroom whether that information is positive or negative. A great need was observed on this campus for more positive messages about ITAs. In response to this need, ISL developed a practical, problem-solving videotape which portrayed a communicative approach to assist undergraduates in developing constructive relationships with their ITAs.

One reason for the success of this program lies in its highly practical nature. For many U.S. undergraduates who view internationalization or cultural competence as an abstract concept having nothing to do with them, improving communication with their teaching assistants brings this concept very close to home. "Oh, No" sessions also include current statistics projecting for students the likelihood of their working with or for a foreign-born person in their career.

When the "Oh, No" program is discussed on this campus, it is suggested as a program that students can use to increase their cultural competency. Consequently, whereas working to communicate with an ITA may have previously been viewed as something negative, students are learning to reframe their perception of their ITAs and to understand their own part in traversing the bridge of intercultural understanding.

This program challenges the widely held notion that it is acceptable to blame all problems in the U.S. student/ITA relationship on the ITA's accent or language ability. Though some U.S. students have directed legitimate concerns towards their ITAs, many have camouflaged their prejudices in these complaints. In the words of one student, "From Oh, No to Ok: Communicating with your International Teaching Assistant" has helped to see my part in making my relationship with my international teaching assistant a good one. I used to blame him for my bad grades."

In the past year, ISL has shown the "Oh, No" video not only to students primarily in residence halls, but also to a number of administrators on the campus. Administrative support has been pronounced including that of the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education, Academic Advisors and the Office of Admissions. Thus, though ISL's primary audience is undergraduate students, the office is also part of a large network that is working to internationalize the university as a whole.

Leadership Development

Student Affairs and Services at MSU values developing and supporting leadership skills in student leaders. ISL contributes a cross-cultural dimension to several components of this divisional priority. Sections of the Department of Education's Leadership Training class are taught by staff and graduate students from Student Affairs and Services. ISL has produced a module that is available for this staff upon request. This module consists of one or more class periods where students can heighten their cross-cultural communication skills through simulation experiences.

Additionally, ISL plays a strong role in the Annual Student Affairs and Services Student Leadership Conference. This annual day-long conference is completely planned by student leaders for student leaders and annually attracts four hundred students. ISL has suggested keynote speakers each year who can weave the need for a global perspective into their presentations. ISL staff have also presented a variety of cross-cultural competency building sessions at the conference and have (successfully) encouraged conference planners to include notable international faculty and staff as presenters.

Training Programs

ISL conducts a variety of cross-cultural training programs for students across the MSU campus. In 1992, through a COOP Grant from NAFSA: Association of International Educators, ISL and Residence Life developed a cross-cultural training program for undergraduate residence hall leaders including resident assistants, minority aides, hall government leaders and others who are responsible for a myriad of programs in the Residence Life system. This program, co-facilitated by trained U.S. and international graduate students, provides an interactive, audiovisual, problem-solving approach to increasing global sensitivity and communication skills. The training is available and now incorporated into each hall's training schedule guaranteeing that all hall staff receive training regardless of the diversity of the undergraduate population. Topics addressed in this training include: 1) the role of internationalism in an already culturally diverse U.S.; 2) language issues for Americans communicating with international students such as colloquial usages, accents and feedback strategies; 3) strategies for dealing with those who are culturally different such as role-playing cross-cultural situations to correct miscommunication, how to "tune in" to your own cultural stereotyping and coping with inner fears of difference; 4) and communicative-style topics such as topics of conversations, forms of interaction, non-verbal communication and levels of meaning, factual and emotional.

Similar training programs have been conducted for other student groups such as the Union Activities Board (UAB) staff and Leadership Conference attendees, etc. ISL also spends much of its time providing consultative services for student leaders who wish to provide internationalizing opportunities for others. Many registered student organizations, members of graduate and undergraduate student governments and resident assistants and minority aides in Residence Life regularly utilize the human and material (maps, books, videos, cultural data, cross-cultural simulations) resources of the office.

Students seeking assistance from ISL often want "tip of the iceberg" programming. If one thinks of culture as an iceberg, nine-tenths of which is out of sight (below the water line) and one-tenth of which is readily available within our periphery, many students are only able to focus on that which is culturally visible.

"Tip of the iceberg" requests usually involve the arts; that is international music, dance, food, etc. ISL recognizes that many students are at a developmental level where these events are the extent that their cultural awareness capacity can handle at the present time. Other students are interested in the dimensions of culture that lie below the surface of the iceberg and frequently out of consciousness, those consisting of elements such as decision making practices, sex roles, notions of leadership, ordering of time and notions about logic. Many times, however, programs involving the arts have led students to a quest for cultural material embedded more deeply into the iceberg. As one student reports, "We asked for a program of Latin American dance but ended up learning more about Latin American culture than we expected. Hey, after that, I took a political science class on Latin American politics."

Challenges

Though ISL has enjoyed great success at MSU, there have been challenges as well. For example, assessing student's current level of cultural competence in order to target strategies for growth is not always an easy task. Additionally, most programs, activities or training sessions are composed of students at a variety of developmental levels, thus providing ISL with the great challenge of how to provide enough material for each student to grow. The Bennetts⁷ suggest that offering students more information than they are culturally competent to handle can, in fact, be counter-productive and result in student's reversing their development to a lower stage.

ISL acknowledges that developing global competency skills represents only one component of a national need for cultural sensitivity and competence at many diverse levels including domestic, non-dominant ethnic cultures, gender difference, sexual orientation and concerns of the physically challenged. It is unfortunately true that some systems and individuals who acknowledge the cultural concerns of one group are not able to acknowledge those of another group. ISL staff are involved in Student Affairs and campus-wide committee and training programs that emphasize sensitivity and skills that address the realities of all of these groups. This involvement also seeks to address the concerns of some members of the MSU community who might believe that an

internationalizing unit might be interested only in non-domestic issues. It is the belief of this author that a unit such as ISL should respect and seek to understand all cultures, both locally as well as globally.

Conclusion

Milton and Janet Bennett⁵ suggest that "an intercultural communication approach is a promising direction for incorporating both international and domestic cultural diversity into the higher education enterprise." This approach has been a successful operating structure for ISL at MSU; one which provides theoretical and practical solutions to the dilemmas of how to talk to someone who is different than oneself.

The programs described in this article depict specific examples of the ways in which this approach has been successfully integrated into Student Affairs and Services at MSU. The development of such a program also acknowledges that international educators can play an important role in escorting students into the 21st century.

As more students develop cultural sensitivity and competence, Craig² notes "perhaps future Americans will define patriotism not as a belief in the superiority of one's nation over others, but rather, in the words of former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark, as a commitment to 'motivate the whole country to be as good a neighbor in the community of nations as the conscience of individuals motivates them to be in the communities where they live.'"

Endnotes

- 1 Zeke Berman, 1978. *Faces or Values*. Photograph.
- 2 Marshall Singer, 1987. *Intercultural Communication: A Perceptual Approach*. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc, page 9).
- 3 Arthur Levine. "The Making of a Generation." *Change*, Vol. 25, Number 4, page 12.
- 4 Council to Review Undergraduate Education, 1988. "Opportunities for Renewal." (East Lansing: Michigan State University, page 8).
- 5 Milton Bennett, 1986. "A Developmental Approach to Training for Intercultural Sensitivity." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, Vol. 10.

- 6 Mary Bresnahan & Min Sun Kim, 1991. "The Effect of Authoritarianism in Bias toward Foreign Teaching Assistants." Paper delivered at the 41st Annual Conference of the International Communication Association, Intercultural Division.
- 7 Milton Bennett, op. cit. See endnote 5.
- 8 Janet & Milton Bennett, 1993. *Learning Across Cultures: Intercultural Communication and International Educational Exchange*. (ed. Gary Althen, rev. ed.) (Washington, DC: NAFSA: Association of International Educators).
- 9 Betty Jean Craige, 1994. "Multiculturalism and the Vietnam Syndrome." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 12, 1994, page B3.



Incoming East-West Center students get acquainted at a reception in their honor.
Photo by Deborah Booker

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