How College Students Experience Intercultural Learning: Key Features and Approaches

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Many colleges and universities in the United States aim to promote intercultural competence in their students. However, most research on this outcome has focused on the content of educational programs (what educators offer) rather than on how students experience intercultural learning. This qualitative inquiry from the Wabash National Study analyzed 207 intercultural experiences from 161 college students on 6 campuses to identify contexts, characteristics, and key features of how they experience intercultural learning. Using grounded theory approaches, we summarized student interviews over 2 years, conducted open and axial coding to identify themes, and evaluated the themes over time. Using this approach, we identified three major themes: (a) that intercultural learning occurred when students directly encountered others’ experiences; (b) that feeling safe enough to explore cultural differences was a key dimension of intercultural learning; and (c) that students used a variety of approaches that led to intercultural learning (from simply listening or watching to exploring how one's personal identity related to intercultural understanding) and that these varied in degree of complexity and agency. Implications for practice are offered to help educators make decisions about how to promote intercultural effectiveness in collegiate settings.

Keywords: intercultural effectiveness, intercultural learning, college students, higher education
tency. However, in addition to documenting what changes occur as a result of such educational interventions, we need to more closely examine how these changes occur (the mechanisms of intercultural education). Qualitative inquiry is particularly well suited to investigating the process and the quality of intercultural learning. In particular, studies that examine a broad span of collegiate intercultural experiences may add to our understanding of how students learn as well as the conditions of their learning. With such information, educators may better understand the dynamics and mechanisms underlying intercultural learning.

To address the need for studies that examine the process of intercultural learning, this research analyzes college students’ intercultural experiences to better understand how students learn to be interculturally effective. Toward this end, we sought to identify characteristics and key features of students’ intercultural experiences for clues about the nature of the development of this educational outcome. Our guiding question was, “What do these experiences tell us about the development of intercultural effectiveness?” Ultimately, our goal is to provide a more nuanced description of the qualities of these experiences that will help educators make decisions about how to promote intercultural effectiveness in collegiate settings.

Intercultural Effectiveness

Although scholars widely agree that higher education should foster the development of culturally competent citizens, there is no consensus about what constitutes intercultural effectiveness (Deardorff, 2006; Hannigan, 1990). An early conception of intercultural effectiveness by Hammer, Gudykunst, and Wiseman (1978) suggested that the construct was comprised of three dimensions: (a) the ability to deal with psychological stress, (b) the ability to communicate effectively, and (c) the ability to establish interpersonal relationships. Although this definition stressed skills, subsequent efforts to characterize intercultural effectiveness described a broader array of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. For example, van der Zee and van Oudenhoven (2000) characterized intercultural effectiveness as a construct composed of five components: (a) open-mindedness, (b) cultural empathy, (c) emotional stability, (d) flexibility, and (e) social initiative. In contrast, Stone (2006) described intercultural effectiveness as being composed of emotional intelligence, cultural knowledge, motivation, openness, resilience, reflectiveness, sensitivity, and skills (e.g., in oral communication).

Deardorff (2006) also envisioned intercultural effectiveness as a multidimensional construct that she conceptualized as a pyramid for which the base is comprised of individual attitudes such as respect, openness, curiosity, and discovery. She argued that if one’s base attitudes are strong, then one has an increased capacity to develop and comprehend knowledge needed to interact with diverse others (e.g., cultural self-awareness, deep understanding of knowledge and culture, culture specific information, sociolinguistic awareness). With increased knowledge and understanding, one may achieve the desired internal outcomes of intercultural interactions that include adaptability, flexibility, ethnorelativity, and empathy. Ultimately, the internal outcomes described by Deardorff are necessary for one to reach one’s desired external outcomes, to behave and communicate in a manner that allows one to achieve one’s stated goals.

As these approaches show, conceptions of intercultural effectiveness vary; further, they continue to evolve. For the purposes of this study, we defined intercultural effectiveness as “knowledge of cultures and cultural practices (one’s own and others’), complex cognitive skills for decision making in intercultural contexts, social skills to function effectively in diverse groups, and personal attributes that include flexibility and openness to new ideas” (King, Kendall Brown, Lindsay, & VanHecke, 2007, p. 5). We chose this definition to capture the knowledge, attitudinal, and behavioral components that we believe comprise intercultural effectiveness.

Theoretical Framing

In this study, we used a grounded theory approach in the tradition of Corbin and Strauss (1990), drawing on previously existing theory and research to inform our understanding of our data. Two theoretical frameworks (described next) primed our thinking as we coded our data. Allport’s (1954) groundbreaking work analyzing conditions of positive intergroup interac-
tions has led to many subsequent insights about how people learn to deal with different others (Gaertner, Dovidio, & Bachman, 1996; Pettigrew, 1998; Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Robb, 1997). These conceptual refinements have been applied to diversity education efforts that foster critical self-reflection and perspective taking, especially in the context of intergroup dialogue programs (Gurin et al., 2004; Maxwell, Nagda, & Thompson, 2010; Nagda, 2006; Nagda & Zuniga, 2003). Such programs also promote the development of empathy (Stephan & Findlay, 1999), including cognitive and affective empathy (Duan & Hill, 1996; Gladstein, 1983).

The intercultural maturity model (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005) is grounded in the Piagetian tradition of constructive developmentalism. This model is a synthesis of clusters of student development theories organized according to Kegan’s (1994) three dimensions of development (cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal), and it maps out changes in elements of intercultural maturity across dimensions and developmental levels of self-authorship. An advanced level of intercultural maturity is characterized by capacities such as being able to use multiple cultural frames, integrate aspects of self into one’s identity, and engage in interdependent relations with diverse others.

Given our grounded approach, we did not explicitly code our data in a manner that directly applied concepts from intercultural contact theory or the intercultural maturity model. However, our understanding of both frameworks sensitized our thinking as we explored the nature of intercultural effectiveness and its development. We discuss these models and other literature on intercultural learning after reporting our findings.

**Method**

This study draws on qualitative data from the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education (WNS), which examines institutional practices and student experiences that are related to growth on seven collegiate outcomes and self-authorship. This current inquiry focuses on the intercultural effectiveness outcome (King et al., 2007, defined above) as revealed through student interviews.

**Sample**

In-depth interviews were conducted with students attending six colleges and universities participating in the qualitative portion of the WNS. These institutions included four small liberal arts colleges, one midsize and one large university: two are Hispanic-serving institutions, and one enrolls approximately 50% African American and 50% White students. In the fall of 2006 (hereafter, Year 1), 315 interview participants were initially selected from among first-year, traditional age students in the quantitative sample, oversampling students of color in order to increase the likelihood of obtaining a racially diverse sample. As shown in Table 1, about one third of these students identified as African American, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islanders (20–33 per group), or as multiracial (n = 9); the remainder identified as White; 54% were female. Approximately 6% were born in countries other than the United States. The participants were recontacted annually for 4 years; 228 were interviewed again in the fall of 2007 (Year 2) and 204 in the fall of 2008 (Year 3). The analytic sample used for this study is described below.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Trained interviewers conducted one-on-one, semistructured interviews that lasted 60 to 90 minutes; these were audiorecorded and transcribed verbatim. The WNS interview (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007) was structured to elicit information relevant to educational experiences students regard as important and how they make meaning (Kegan, 1994) about these experiences. The interview was semistructured in nature; it gave participants maximum freedom to identify relevant content yet guided them to touch on varied domains of their educational experiences that were deemed to foster growth on the seven learning outcomes and self-authorship. Participants received a stipend of $30 for each interview.

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1 As Renn (2003) has noted, the information individuals choose to share about their social identities may differ across contexts and over time. We found this as well. The information provided here reflects what students shared in the context of the annual interviews, and, thus, reflects details not available for earlier publications.
Because the Year 1 interviews primarily described students’ entering characteristics, the data used here are drawn from the Year 2 and 3 interviews. A multistep approach was used for data analysis; these steps are summarized in Table 2. The first step was for trained research team members to create an interview summary for each student, working from the complete transcript. The summary included (among other elements) each experience the student identified as important, its effect (i.e., what the student learned from the experience), and the outcome associated with this learning (here, intercultural effectiveness), using illustrative quotes to support these observations. (See Baxter Magolda and King, 2012, for a detailed description.)

Next, we selected the analytic sample of intercultural experiences, using the criterion that the experience fell within the domain of intercultural effectiveness as defined above. These experiences included students’ accounts of their learning about cultural identities and practices, such as those based on race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, ability, and national origin. By contrast, experiences demonstrating students’ awareness of individual personality differences were not selected for this sample since they were not aligned with the cultural (i.e., collective) identities or traits. This review yielded 207 experiences reported as relevant to the intercultural effectiveness outcome (out of a total of 1,625 important experiences). Of the intercultural experiences, 120 (58%) were reported by 87 participants from Year 2, and the reminder (87 experiences) were reported by 73 participants.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of the Interview Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>24 (8%)</td>
<td>9 (3%)</td>
<td>33 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American/Pacific Islanders</td>
<td>11 (3%)</td>
<td>9 (3%)</td>
<td>20 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic American*</td>
<td>16 (5%)</td>
<td>11 (3%)</td>
<td>27 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White American</td>
<td>102 (32%)</td>
<td>105 (33%)</td>
<td>207 (66%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial American</td>
<td>7 (2%)</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
<td>9 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International students</td>
<td>10 (3%)</td>
<td>9 (3%)</td>
<td>19 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>170 (54%)</td>
<td>145 (46%)</td>
<td>315 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* We use the term Hispanic here since that the term was used in the original survey.

Table 2
Summary of Steps in the Analytic Process and Resulting Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps</th>
<th>Comments–explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Summarize interviews</td>
<td>Research team members identified important experiences through completion of WNS Phase 1 summaries (n = 1,625)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Select analytic sample of intercultural experiences</td>
<td>Criterion: Experiences were in the domain of intercultural effectiveness (n = 207)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Open coding of intercultural experiences for each campus context</td>
<td>Identification of 6 sets of thematic codes per institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Axial coding across campus contexts</td>
<td>Identification of three cross-institutional themes: 1. Encountering others’ experiences during intercultural learning 2. A sense of safety as a mediator to exploring intercultural differences 3. Approaches to participating in intercultural experiences (a) Listen and observe (b) Compare and contrast ideas (c) Engage in personal reflection (d) Explore personal identity as it relates to intercultural understanding (e) Empathize with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Compare themes across years</td>
<td>No time-related themes were found</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
from Year 3. These 160 students were from across all six institutions, 54 (34%) of whom were students of color or identified as multiracial, and 12 (8%) were international students.

**Data Analysis**

A grounded theory approach in the tradition of Corbin and Strauss (1990) was used to develop our codes, categories, and patterns across students’ accounts of their intercultural experiences. Initially, two of us used the guiding question noted above and independently conducted an open coding of students’ intercultural experiences for each institution to reflect institution-specific features. We then discussed their preliminary codes and categories for each institution, clarified criteria and rationales used, and resolved differences to consensus; this process yielded six sets of thematic codes (one set per institution).

Next, two of us conducted axial coding to regroup the institutional codes into overarching categories that captured students’ intercultural experiences. We then discussed the core categories that emerged from this analytic step, resolving differences to consensus, and refined the categories to illustrate themes and patterns regarding the contexts of students’ intercultural experiences and their approaches to intercultural learning. Lastly, we compared emergent themes and categories across Years 2 and 3 to look for possible time-relevant patterns. The emergent themes did not cluster by year but effectively captured the data across both years.

**Establishing Trustworthiness**

We took several steps to establish trustworthiness of our study. First, we provided intensive interviewer training to understand the purpose of the interview and the interview protocol, and an analysis of interviewer subjectivities and how they might affect the interview. All interviewers practiced using the interviews with undergraduates and received feedback. Ultimately, our rigorous training process promoted dependability (Guba, 1981; Krefting, 1991) during data collection and fostered consistency in the interview process across team members.

Second, the interview itself began by building rapport during the first part of the interview to encourage participants to authentically share their experiences; the high return rate of 89.5% between Years 2 and 3 suggests that participants were comfortable with the interview. To build on this trust, we attempted to assign the same interviewer over time for continuity and gave participants the opportunity to give feedback about the interview process at the conclusion of each interview. Although we did not formally engage in member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), we offered copies of the transcripts, and invited participants to clarify transcription errors and to provide additional comments. Across trust building strategies, we enhanced the credibility of our research through prolonged engagement (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) with the participants: The individual interviews typically lasted over an hour, and students were interviewed annually.
Third, training comparable to that of the interviewers was provided for the summarizers. Fourth, we systematically drew on the perspectives of multiple researchers to establish plausible explanations during every step of data analysis. Multiple researchers reviewed the original summaries (and returned to the transcripts as needed), were involved in analytic processes, and reviewed the themes. Through triangulation of investigators (Knaff & Breitmayer, 1989; Krefting, 1991), the interpretations were confirmed and reconfirmed over time as more analyses were completed.

**Study Limitations**

Despite our care in design and attempts to enhance trustworthiness, our work has its limitations. In particular, our sample is limited to students from a small number of institutions that were chosen for their work in promoting liberal arts education, not intercultural effectiveness; this outcome may or may not have been emphasized on these campuses. (An advantage of this sampling, however, is this sample was not drawn from those who had already expressed an interest in intercultural issues or programs, and who therefore might have been predisposed to learn about different cultures.) Further, our data set is limited to experiences that students found memorable enough to mention and chose to share; these may reflect experiences that are distinct in unknown ways, such as those that were salient to their own social identities (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation) or issues they were already exploring.

**Findings**

Our review of these 207 experiences provides insights into the nature of college experiences relevant to how students learn intercultural effectiveness. More specifically, these narratives revealed the nature of contexts where students participated in intercultural learning, how they felt during and after their intercultural experiences, and the manner in which they were engaged during intercultural experiences. We identified three major themes within these narratives, described below.

**Encountering Others’ Experiences During Intercultural Learning**

Our data revealed that students had opportunities to engage in intercultural learning across multiple contexts and that exposure to others’ experiences was often a powerful learning experience. Experiences as varied as academic courses, study abroad trips, service-learning programs, and club activities and friendships all served as fertile ground for meaningful intercultural experiences. Regardless of where the experience was situated, students described being enraptured by hearing others’ stories and observing their experiences because they allowed them to see the world and to make sense of social issues through another’s eyes.

Many students acknowledged that differences in perspectives were rooted in people’s life experiences and social backgrounds. Acknowledging the truth in others’ voices, students used these stories to gain an insider’s view of other cultures, as Joan, a White woman, did in her religion class:

> I understood why they [Muslims] did some of the things the way they did. The hijab was always, “Why are the women covering their heads?” That doesn’t make any sense to me. In the class they told us why they did it, so I was like, “Okay. Now that makes sense.” So you do go through and discuss things and go, “Okay, now I have a better understanding of what that is.”

Insiders’ views provided contextualized descriptions of why and how people engaged in specific cultural practices. For Joan, hearing directly from others helped her believe the stories and gain a deeper understanding of Muslim religious beliefs and practices.

In some cases, students were exposed to others’ culturally based experiences as they built rapport and developed a sense of trust within their relationships. Juliana, an African American woman, translated legal documents during an immersion service project and came to better understand the lives of immigrant workers after hearing their stories. Here, she described what she took away from conversations:

> They’re still going to tell you how they came to the country and what they do now and why they work here . . . . A lot of people say, “Well, I’m educated. I went to the university in Mexico, but I’m not proficient in English. I have children. I can’t go back to school. I don’t have any money.” One of the saddest things to
me is that a lot of times there’s this huge disconnect between communities, especially Latino community or especially communities where they don’t speak English. . . . Just thinking of those hurdles really made me understand of how fortunate I am to be a citizen . . . and how much they’re willing to, in so many ways, lose a part of themselves to become an American, to come to America. . . . I thought that the biggest thing was that if you don’t have vocal power, you don’t have a huge resource for change.

Juliana’s command of Spanish allowed her to hear firsthand the challenges immigrant workers experienced as people who have less privilege in American society. Listening to these voices helped her understand immigrants’ experiences and led her to be more passionate about immigration issues; it also motivated her to improve her language skills to be able to communicate directly with this group. Juliana’s heightened sensitivity to these issues also made her more aware of her position of privilege based on her American citizenship.

Sometimes others’ voices were not overt but became apparent when students were directly observing different cultures in the context of immersion trips, service learning projects, or field trips. As outsiders, students had the ability to watch and attend to others’ experiences, which piqued their curiosity about other cultures. In particular, students expressed interest in others’ daily routines because they often differed from their own customs. For instance, Quinn, a White male, took an immersion trip to Oaxaca where he got a chance to live with a host family and immersed himself in their cultural practices. He found the differences between his host’s family structure and his own especially interesting:

Just living in a family was so different than what I thought of as family. When I think of family, I think of my own family and the crazy, wacky funness that they are. Almost every night the entire family was over, grandparents, uncles, aunts, great aunts, great uncles, nieces, nephews, grandchildren . . . . It was so different. Really opening up what it means to be a family. And different economic dependencies that I take for granted. I take for granted that I have hot water to take a shower. . . . I take for granted that I have electricity. I take for granted the fact that I can go protest in the street and no one’s going to arrest me or shoot at me for it, and that’s not something I want to take for granted in the world. I knew that, but I didn’t experience it. That was important.

Witnessing his host family’s interactions provided Quinn with a different image of family and an expanded understanding of how social systems can be organized. Although Quinn didn’t report having directly heard others’ testimonies, he used observed images of life to create stories, which he then compared and contrasted to his own experiences and viewpoints. This cognitive exercise prompted him to reflect on what he had taken for granted, and seeing how others lived provoked him to examine his own values, beliefs, and assumptions about what a life should be and how people should live their lives. Ultimately, witnessing others’ lived experiences led Quinn to a richer understanding of culture and to greater awareness of the complexities of cultural norms and systems.

A Sense of Safety as a Mediator to Exploring Intercultural Differences

Our analysis of students’ narratives revealed that students’ emotional reactions within a particular educational context played a critical role in shaping their perceptions of intercultural experiences and, subsequently, how they chose to engage in such experiences with others. Regardless of how the experience was structured, whether or not students felt safe during an experience played a central role in determining their emotional responses as well as their degree of willingness to engage with and learn from the experience. In effect, feeling safe to learn and to explore mediated students’ willing participation in experiences that promoted the development of intercultural effectiveness.

Many students perceived an adequate degree of support within their environment. In response to feeling safe, participants tended to feel increasingly open to exploring differences and were more willing to engage in intercultural learning. For example, Leo, a White student at an all-male college, shared his experience discussing gender issues in class with his peers:

[In my] Men and Masculinity class, we brought up a lot of interesting things as far as just your typical masculine things and what’s wrong with that and what’s good about that. . . . You think about the typical things of masculinity: Men don’t cry. Men don’t show emotions. Men are stronger than women. Those are all your typical stereotypical views, and we cut into those a little bit and looked at what’s wrong with this? What makes us different that we don’t have emotions? Because we do. And then when we start to dig into it, we look at what toll does that take on us? I don’t try to keep anything inside . . . . I mean it’s not weak to deal with your emotion. I think it’s weak when you just try
to push them in and just forget about them and I think it’s harmful. So we did a lot of that kind of stuff.

Because the course was within a close-knit, single-gendered environment, Leo perceived the space as one where it was permissible to think about the ways in which being male has affected his worldview. Engaging in a critical examination of gender norms ultimately helped him realize that some notions of masculinity are limiting. Moreover, Leo expressed a willingness to challenge the definition of being a man and described expressing his emotions despite being socialized not to do so.

In contrast to Leo, several participants described experiences where they perceived the environment to be unwelcoming or unsafe for respectful intercultural experiences and in response, felt disappointment, isolation, and anger. Alex is one of these students and relayed feeling extreme discomfort based on his interactions with the instructor of his Mexican history class:

I actually felt kind of bad to be a Hispanic student that day. Because first of all, I am the last generation of my family to not know Spanish, which is okay. I’m fine with that. But this professor was a light-skinned Hispanic fellow. And he expected everybody in this class to know Spanish, which I didn’t . . . So I felt really bizarre in that class, just because of that fact that he expected you to know something purely because of your nationality. So I felt very strange in that class.

When the professor made incorrect assumptions about how Alex connected with his ethnic identity, this turned a space that was initially assumed to be safe into one that was uncomfortable and contentious. After experiencing discomfort and alienation, Alex eventually withdrew from the class and expressed a decreased desire to learn about Mexican history if the expectations for him were raised based on his ethnicity.

**Approaches to Participating in Intercultural Experiences**

Once students felt a sense of safety and decided to willingly participate in intercultural experiences, they took a number of different approaches to understanding the intercultural differences at hand. Our analysis highlighted five approaches that students frequently used, namely, (a) listen and observe, (b) compare and contrast ideas, (c) engage in personal reflection, (d) explore personal identity as it relates to intercultural understanding, and (e) empathize with others. These approaches display varying degrees of complexity as well as agency with which students engage their minds and their hearts. Notably, the practices deployed were often spontaneous rather than intentionally enacted by students regardless of the context of their intercultural experience.

**Listen and observe.** The listen and observe approach was frequently used when students initially encountered differences. During contact experiences, numerous participants noted that they responded by paying close attention to others and the environment as a means of gaining a rudimentary understanding of intercultural differences. When this approach was used, students indicated that they became more aware of cultural differences, started to see different dimensions of identity, and began to understand people as being more complex than they had previously thought. Here, Penny, a White woman, describes watching a pagan ceremony as part of a course:

Before that ceremony it was like, “They worship the devil. It’s all evil.” Now I know they worship nature, not the devil. I do have a different perspective that I probably wouldn’t have had if I hadn’t witnessed it. She [the instructor] kind of went over it to let us decide whether we wanted to or not participate. So if I hadn’t had that discussion, I think I would have still looked at them [pagans] like, “You’re evil.” . . . I like being able to look at things differently.

Penny indicated that “witnessing” increased her cultural knowledge and changed her negative perceptions of pagan practices. However, listen and observe as an approach tended to be more reactive than proactive in that its primary aim was to acquire information in an unfamiliar situation and did not elicit students’ previous knowledge to explore differences and diversity.

**Compare and contrast ideas.** Students who used the compare and contrast approach moved beyond simply absorbing information to carefully examining it in comparison to their own background and life experiences. It is interesting that students tended to use compare and contrast to interpret their experiences after rather than during interactions across cultural differences, as though doing so required more space or time. They also leveraged this approach to find connections between their cultural background and those of others to alleviate
feelings of discomfort. For example, Diana described her experience being the only African American in an Asian American history course that was composed predominantly of Asian American and Pacific Islander students:

I felt like a minority, but not so much because while . . . it’s [history] from an Asian American perspective, they also went through the slave trade and all those things. The class talked about Hawaii and the plantations and it was like, “Oh, these people went through the same things that my ancestors did.” And so it was kind of okay. I’ll get a kinship, a connection, and that’s why I learned a lot of things I didn’t know before. I didn’t know about Filipinos and how they were looked at when they came over to the States and different things. I just felt [that] even though we were from different ancestors, we were all the same, because we went through the same. Our ancestors went through the same struggle.

Diana initially described feeling out of place in class since she was the only African American student, but felt a “kinship” with her Asian American peers after comparing and contrasting the their cultural histories, especially their struggles related to legacies of slavery and racial stigmatization. Thus, the compare-and-contrast approach seems to be more complex than the listen-and-observe approach because it moved students from surface-level understanding of a culture (i.e., what is going on) to seeing the core of cultural histories, representations, and practices (i.e., how and why it is so).

Notably, several students who exercised the compare-and-contrast approach also found themselves reevaluating stereotypes after trying to understand the genesis of cultural differences and culturally embedded ideas. After reevaluating stereotypes, some students began to see people as multidimensional and more complex than the caricatures associated with stereotypes. When stereotypes were intentionally examined, participants were more critical of ideas and started to see culture as enacted rather than as a static artifact.

Engage in personal reflection. Some participants described continuing to engage in personal reflection after participating in an intercultural experience. Notably, few of these opportunities for reflection were part of an institutional practice; rather, students created space to think about their intercultural experiences more deeply as they attempted to make sense of them. Students often used reflection to determine where new information and perspectives fit in with their previous experiences, values, and beliefs. For example, Rae, a White woman, participated in a semester-long workshop on racism that challenged her to think about her own identity, her interactions with her African American boyfriend, and her understanding of the dynamics of race. Here, she describes how her engagement in the experience unfolded:

[The workshop] basically taught me that there’s actually real [race] issues that people deal with every day that you can’t get rid of, nor would you even want to at some point. . . . But I think about it a lot because in daily life, dealing with my boyfriend and trying to work out . . . what is an okay way to act. It doesn’t freeze me up as much as it did before, but it definitely is still a factor in everything that I do every day almost, which is crazy.

After participating in the workshop, Rae readily connected her learning in the workshop to her daily experiences. As she began to think more about how privilege manifests itself within the context of interracial relationships, Rae considered ways in which she could create and maintain a respectful relationship with her boyfriend. Ultimately, continued reflection and understanding the impact of racism on others she cared about provided what she characterizes as a powerful learning experience. In this regard, personal reflection as an approach to intercultural experiences is more agentic and complex than the prior two approaches because students willingly created space to ruminate and began to reconsider the meaning of their cultural background and life experiences.

Explore personal identity. For some students, intercultural experiences led to explorations of personal identity. Like engaging in personal reflection, this approach is also agentic, but uses one’s personal background as an ingredient to fuel one’s desire to learn rather than as a frame of reference. Participants who chose to look inward and explore their cultural heritage often craved knowledge and a greater sense of connection to a specific dimension of their identity (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation). As a result of engaging in this process, students described feeling a sense of pride and ownership over how they defined themselves. For example, Daniel came to identify as Filipino American and changed the way he understood his cultural identity and heritage after taking a leadership position in the Filipino stu-
dent association on his campus. His strong feelings of connection to his ethnic heritage led him to explore issues germane to members of the Filipino community. In particular, he felt a duty to give voice to Filipino American veterans, whose plight had long been ignored:

It’s important to me because my grandmother’s brothers were part of that group of veterans who didn’t get reimbursed [after World War II] and . . . I went to San Francisco and fed the homeless and I noticed a lot of the homeless people there are Filipino American veterans . . . So when they [Filipino American veterans] came back, they had nothing to go to, so they just live on the streets now. That’s another reason why I joined the [Filipino student] organization because it struck a note in me. I mean it called to me when they reintroduced this issue [Filipino American veteran compensation] to me.

Ultimately, Daniel’s strong connection to his Filipino American identity compelled him to engage in service projects and political advocacy initiatives that were intended to benefit Filipino American World War II veterans. Daniel’s exploration of his ethnic identity subsequently fostered a sense of agency that allowed him act on behalf of other Filipino Americans.

Empathize with others. The final approach we saw from students when engaging in intercultural experiences was an effort to empathize with others. This approach was the most complex of the group because it includes both cognitive and emotional dimensions (Gladstein, 1983) and engaged students across both dimensions. Cognitive empathy is similar to perspective taking in that both involve trying to understand someone else’s experience, often from the perspective of the other’s identity. In addition, emotional empathy includes the generation or expression of feelings that are similar to or made in response to another person’s emotions. We found that when an emotional response was elicited, cognitive empathy had first occurred. Moreover, students who were most affected by the use of empathy were those who allowed themselves to both think about and feel in response to interacting with people who were different from them.

Notably, in addition to emerging as one of five approaches for navigating intercultural experiences, empathy was also an outcome of encounters across differences in social identities. As students attempted to understand others, they often gained an increased appreciation for others’ cultural backgrounds and in some cases, felt more connected with them. For instance, Owen, a White male, went on an immersion trip to Honduras and encountered abject poverty. He displayed great empathy as he attempted to understand others’ experiences by putting himself into their shoes:

The kids at the orphanage are from really difficult backgrounds, and they can be really, really hard to deal with. You see all kinds of terrible things. I mean, one of my students, his 15-year-old sister had been raped by her dad and had a baby. I mean some really messed up situations you see as a volunteer that you wouldn’t want to subject yourself to.

Owen’s response has a strong emotional dimension. He appeared to feel saddened by the poverty and violence around him. Moreover, he expressed compassion for those who suffer and appreciation for those who are willing to serve others. His heightened sensitivity to others’ suffering, in turn, led Owen to struggle to make sense of his privilege upon his return:

I’m living in this first world culture of excess I sort of do feel responsible for it, because a lot of my actions here are in some ways creating poverty in places like Honduras and making the problem worse, I feel.

Rather than ignoring his feelings of guilt, Owen used them to become more mindful and began to pay more attention to how he used resources and spent his free time. He also expressed a desire to conduct research on those who participate in international service trips to better understand their motivations to engage in this type of work abroad.

Synthesis of approaches to participating in intercultural experiences. These five approaches are distinct from each other in that students used their cognitive and affective capacities to understand differences across cultures with varying degrees of complexity. For example, listen and observe is the least complex approach since students focus on absorbing external information to create a baseline understanding of the environment but without building further on this foundation. Compare and contrast is a more cognitively complex response than listen and observe because students integrated new information with their prior knowledge and experiences, thus, expanding the foundation and creating a perspective that drew from a broader knowledge base. Students using both of these approaches did so without engaging emotionally, only cognitively. Exploring per-
sonal identity may have elicited some emotions, but primarily focused on acquiring information to more deeply understand and connect with one dimension of one’s identity. Although this approach built on students’ previous cultural knowledge, it did not always lead to a broader understanding of cultural differences. Empathize with others reflects the greatest degree of complexity among students’ approaches because they could use either or both of their cognitive and affective capacities, immersing themselves in another’s experience to better understand it.

The extent to which students displayed a sense of agency also differed across approaches. In the approach of listen and observe, students evidenced minimal agency because they passively received information. In comparison, students who participated in intercultural experiences as a means to explore personal identity showed greater agency by intentionally seeking knowledge and understanding differences. Compare and contrast reflects greater agency in that it requires more sustained engagement with differences in the content or context of experiences. Engaging in personal reflection also evidences greater agency compared with the first two approaches because students actively engaged in reflection about their intercultural learning and considered the implications.

Students did not tend to limit their use of a given approach to a specific context. For example, although some students on a study abroad immersion trip focused on acquiring a baseline understanding of another culture using the listen-and-observe approach, others leveraged the compare-and-contrast or engaged in personal reflection approaches as a means to understand the host culture in comparison with their own culture. Thus, it seems that individuals’ choice of approach appeared to be based on their cognitive and emotional capacity to respond to the intercultural differences encountered during a particular experience, and that the capacity for deploying a range of approaches appears to vary with individual readiness to engage in intercultural experiences.

Discussion

Our analysis of students’ experiences provided several insights into the nature and intercultural effectiveness and its development. First, we found that students were most drawn into intercultural learning opportunities after being exposed to others’ experiences (e.g., Joan), which is consistent with intercultural contact theory. Students in this study attended most to intercultural learning opportunities that brought others’ experiences and voices to the forefront. Through hearing about or observing others’ experiences, students were able to understand culture as it is lived rather than viewing it as an abstraction (e.g., Quinn), which enabled them to draw connections between others’ culturally based experiences and their own. These observations are consistent with the essential role of exposure in Allport’s (1954) intercultural contact theory. It also reflects Pettigrew’s (1998) reformulation of intergroup contact theory identifying four processes that mediate attitude change, the first of which is learning about those who are different (in his term, the “outgroup”) and the finding from his more recent meta-analysis of research (Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner, & Christ, 2011) that “greater contact is routinely associated with less prejudice” (p. 274). In these examples, contact occurred both directly and indirectly. Pettigrew et al. (2011) reported that indirect intergroup contacts are also effective in reducing prejudice, a point not recognized in Allport’s model. Among our analytic sample of experiences, both those involving direct and indirect contact with diverse others led to intercultural learning. This leads us to suggest that the quality of the contact rather than its type may be the key variable here. For example, in the context of learning from study abroad, Lee (2012) reported that the use of blogging and ethnographic interviews were effective means of promoting deeper engagement, and in a study using a pre-post design using a control group, Pedersen (2010) reported that guided reflection and intercultural coaching were effective strategies for promoting intercultural effectiveness outcomes. The use of pedagogical strategies such as these that increase the quality of contact between diverse others offers rich resources for educators attempting to enhance the quality of students’ intercultural educational experiences.

Learning from exposure to differences may seem like so obvious a starting place that it hardly merits discussion. However, the fact that this surfaced as a theme in students’ commentaries about their significant intercultural expe-
Experiences serve as a good reminder that this is a necessary starting point, in part because it reflects students’ awareness and understanding about intercultural issues and dynamics, however naïve or unsophisticated. Further, naïvity about different cultural practices and values is one of the characteristics associated with the initial level of intercultural maturity (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005), as is an egocentric view of social issues. As students move toward an intermediate level of development, they have the capacities to accept uncertainty and to begin to understand the basis for multiple perspectives, and to suspend judgment in interaction with diverse others. Several of the experiences reported in this article appear to have laid the groundwork for development as described in this model. (Due to its complexity, we explore the developmental findings in a related study; Perez, Shim, King, & Baxter Magolda, 2011.)

Second, our findings revealed that feeling safe was a critical factor in students’ willingness to engage in intercultural learning. Once students perceived their environment to be safe, they were able to explore, ask questions, and examine their beliefs about other cultures more closely. Notably, those who felt unsafe or unwanted withdrew from intercultural learning experiences even though they were initially interested in engaging (e.g., Alex). King, Baxter Magolda, and Massé (2011) reported a similar response in a study of students’ experience with dissonance based on interactions with diverse peers. In their review of studies of prejudice reduction, Pettigrew et al. (2011) reported that both positive and negative emotions serve as affective mediators and that an increase in empathy reduces prejudice. In this study, feelings served both to prime students to engage in and to avoid cross-cultural experiences and affected what they learned. At this point, there are clear indicators across studies that the emotional dimension of intercultural learning plays an important role (e.g., developing empathy for the out-group, as suggested by Pettigrew et al., 2011), but this is not yet well understood.

Third, our findings indicated that within the same types of intercultural contexts (e.g., academic courses, study abroad trips), students use an array of approaches to engage in learning, and that these approaches vary in complexity and agency. The complexity with which one interprets and approaches intercultural issues is at the heart of the developmental ordering of King and Baxter Magolda’s (2005) intercultural maturity model. Those who are most nimble across approaches and who can access the more complex approaches may have the greatest capacity to engage in and benefit from intercultural learning because this kind of agility enables students to adapt their type of engagement to the circumstances. Other individual characteristics and background experiences may also affect what primes and what inhibits student learning across cultural differences. For example, language interest, degree of ethnocentrism, and intercultural communication apprehension (Kim & Goldstein, 2005; Neuliep & Ryan, 1998) have been shown to influence approaches and subsequent learning from intercultural contact: Those with greater interest in learning different languages, lower degrees of ethnocentrism, and lower fear of intercultural communication are most likely to benefit from their intercultural experiences.

The themes reported in this article suggest several implications for practice. For example, others’ voices and experiences were particularly powerful when students were exposed to them over an extended period of time in contexts such as friendships and immersion trips. On the basis of these data, educators would be well advised to consider ways to create and sustain contact across differences over time and take advantage of the range of contexts in which students engage in cultural learning. This suggests that providing opportunities to engage in intercultural experiences (i.e., providing opportunities for contact) is a necessary but not sufficient educational intervention.

The value of sustained contact also calls into question the use of one-time campus programs or passive programs as strategies to foster the development of intercultural effectiveness. Although these programmatic efforts are used in many campus communities, students in this study rarely mentioned them as important experiences. These findings suggest that students should be encouraged to deal with the sources and consequences of their intercultural anxieties (Pettigrew, 1998) and for initial experiences to be followed by more challenging experiences that allow them to hear others’ voices and en-
gage in deeper exploration of cultural difference. For example, border pedagogy (Giroux, 1991) can be used to help students share their personal histories and to encourage them to challenge, cross, and even reconfigure physical and cultural borders. By promoting an understanding of the constructed nature of cultural knowledge and empowering individuals to critically examine cultural hegemony, border pedagogy can be used to enrich students’ capacities for intercultural learning.

The finding that students used different approaches within the same types of intercultural contexts suggests that providing opportunities to engage in intercultural experiences (i.e., providing opportunities for both direct and indirect contact) is a necessary but not sufficient educational intervention. As they enable and monitor student engagement in opportunities, educators would be well advised to attend to the approaches students use to understand their experiences, assessing their complexity and agency. Also, given the variety of approaches observed here, educators should consider varied pedagogies to engage students. Adopting a single pedagogical strategy might disadvantage students who are unfamiliar with, skeptical about, or not attracted to engaging in a given approach. If students have reservations about engaging in these pedagogies, we encourage educators to develop safe spaces and explore these with students. We also encourage educators to look for evidence of the development of each of the attributes of intercultural effectiveness as defined above (knowledge, complex cognitive skills, social skills, and personal attributes such as openness to new ideas). Yonkers-Talz (2004) provided an excellent example of what can be accomplished through the thoughtful integration of these factors into a study abroad curriculum.

In summary, this inquiry has provided a more nuanced view of when and how students engage in intercultural experiences that foster understanding of the development of intercultural effectiveness. This increased understanding of the importance of direct encounters with others’ experiences and the role of emotional safety can be used by educators to create and sustain opportunities for students to participate in meaningful experiences across cultural differences that incorporate these factors. Further, educators who understand how students experience intercultural learning, specifically that the approaches vary in complexity and agency, can use this information to sequence learning experiences in increasingly complex and challenging ways. Ultimately, increasing students’ capacities for intercultural effectiveness is essential if we are committed to fulfilling higher education’s promise of preparing them to live in an increasingly complex and diverse world.

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