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Developing Intercultural Competence in Higher Education: International Students' Stories and Self-Reflection

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ABSTRACT

Developing Intercultural Competence in Higher Education: International Students' Stories and Self-Reflection is a timely publication based on an innovative methodology called the UNESCO Story Circles. To facilitate the development of intercultural competence, the book draws on the analysis and reflection on the lived experiences of international students from diverse backgrounds. It provides valuable insights for not only students but also educators and practitioners involved in international education.



**DEVELOPING
INTERCULTURAL
COMPETENCE IN HIGHER
EDUCATION**
INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' STORIES
AND SELF-REFLECTION

Lily A. Arasaratnam-Smith and Darla K. Deardorff



The recent increase in the demand for global citizenship, also known as intercultural citizenship (Lantz-Deaton & Golubeva, 2020), has led to a growing focus on Intercultural Competence (IC). IC is defined as “complex abilities that are required to perform *effectively* and *appropriately* when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself” (Fantini, 2009, p. 458). One sector in which the development of IC has drawn considerable attention is tertiary education (e.g., Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; Gregersen-Hermans, 2015). IC is particularly compatible with the goals of tertiary education, which aims to develop students as future global citizens.

Such considerable potential has turned tertiary education into a focal point for IC enhancement. However, the current IC literature is still suffering from inconsistencies, which have resulted from the complex nature of this construct and the diversity of the frameworks.

Using an innovative approach, Arasaratnam-Smith and Deardorff's book, contributes to the IC literature by offering a consistent and solid conceptualization of IC. Each of these chapters begins with a short but informative discussion about one theme. It then provides a number of student narratives, followed by a short commentary. A conclusion in each chapter then rounds off the discussion and suggests important, relevant implications, as well as several reflection questions intended to facilitate IC development.

The introduction to the book is devoted to the UNESCO Story Circles methodology, an innovative tool developed by Deardorff (2020) for IC development, and a brief conceptualization of IC, including some predominant models of this construct in the literature. The book is then divided into two parts. Part 1, comprising four chapters, concentrates on students' personal stories with a focus on identity and culture (Chapter 2), stereotypes (Chapter 3), and cultural differences (Chapter 4). The focus of Chapter 2 is on how living in a new culture can change one's identity and that this identity formation can contribute to the understanding of self and others. In Chapter 3, the authors find from personal narratives that negative stereotypes prove to be surmountable if "people are motivated and open to understanding other perspectives through dialogue or immersive experiences, through intentionality or unexpected turn of events" (p. 63). To further demonstrate how international students can overcome cultural differences, the authors review various cultural difference frameworks, such as Hall's (1976) framework of low- and high-context communication as well as student narratives in Chapter 4.

In Part 2, the focus shifts to an inward approach to developing the IC of students. Chapter 5 focuses on what happens in intercultural encounters and encourages self-reflecting practices to enhance IC. In Chapter 6, the authors discuss how community support can help one overcome the challenges of living in a new culture. In Chapter 7, the authors discuss how enhanced IC can lead to deepened intercultural relationships. As the concluding chapter, Chapter 8 focuses on the development of IC as a lifelong process. It begins with a short reference to two frequently used models of IC in the literature: the Process Model of Intercultural Competence (Deardorff, 2006) and the Integrated Model of Intercultural Communication Competence (IMICC) (Arasaratnam, 2006). Unlike the previous chapters, where narratives obtained from the students constitute the data, discussion in this chapter is primarily guided by one of the authors' own narratives. It provides insights about facilitating IC development in three target groups: international students, international pedagogists, and community members that host international students.

One unique feature of the book lies in its practice-based approach to IC development and diverse participant populations. The book goes beyond theoretical discussions to demonstrate how the method can be applied in practice. With the recent introduction of Story Circles methodology, the book is a timely publication as it provides examples of how to apply some of the principles of this methodology. Thus, it can be used as a step-by-step guide to instruct IC researchers and practitioners on applying specific Story Circles prompts to enhance IC. In addition, the book fills a gap in IC literature by presenting a consistent and practical methodology that is applicable to various disciplines. Another outstanding feature of the book is the use of self-reflection. It is worth noting that the reader is not simply left with some general advice on how the content of each chapter should be reflected upon; instead, Arasaratnam-Smith and Deardorff introduce tools for reflections in Chapter 1, to help readers better understand the practices in each chapter. What seems to be missing in the book is some visuals associated with the theme of each chapter. If the book is to be published as a second edition, we recommend adding black and white drawings associated with the theme of each chapter.

In general, this book is concise and digestible. It avoids dense theoretical discussions but focuses on the essentials through a clear logic and accessible language. Despite the term “Higher Education” in the title, the book is not solely intended for those involved in this sector but can also be used by academics and practitioners across different disciplines, such as business and engineering. This is a must-read book for anyone with an interest in IC, regardless of their level of expertise in the field.

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