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Intercultural learning in a virtual world

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From our rural neighborhoods to our urban towns, societies across the globe are experiencing unique demographic shifts spawning linguistically and culturally diverse communities (Banks, 2016; Johnson, 2012; Parisi, Lichter, & Taquino, 2015). Therefore, linguistic and cultural skill development remains critical in our increasingly diverse society. Thus, our pedagogies must reflect such diversities and shifts through innovative classroom transformations that meaningfully engage learners in the development of *intercultural competence*. Depending on the discipline, *intercultural competence* has been defined in numerous ways, but principally entails “effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioral orientations to the world” (Spitzberg & Chagnon, 2009, p. 7). That is, interlocutors’ attitudes (or affect) can influence understanding and skill development (cognition) and, thereby, impact interactions and practices (or behaviors). Going beyond awareness and exposure, intercultural competence involves the practical application of knowledge and skills in diverse interactions.

Research in both medical (Anand & Lahiri, 2009; Sentell, Braun, Davis, & Davis, 2013; Vanderpool, Ches, Finney Rutten, & Squiers, 2009; Wen et al., 2014) and legal contexts (Eades, 2008; Hafner, 2012) consistently evidences that a lack of intercultural competence results in serious consequences ranging from significant financial costs to fatalities. Hence, intercultural competence unquestionably plays a vital role in our globally changing societies and should, therefore, be developed as a life-long learning competency that can begin to take shape in our virtual classrooms. Accordingly, this presentation will focus on three principal areas: 1) the role of intercultural competence in society, 2) innovative virtual examples of intercultural competence development in language courses, and 3) global approaches to virtual learning.

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