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ABSTRACT

This brief highlights some of the trends in the literature related to intercultural understanding and provides a list of resources that can be used by educators in promoting it. The consensus of the literature on promoting cultural understanding is that the term "culture" generally refers to a system of beliefs, customs, and behaviors shared by a group of individuals. The terms "cultural competence" and "intercultural competence" are used in reference to the need to develop an understanding and appreciation for cultures other than one's own. Assisting individuals in developing intercultural competence is the basis for a number of sources that deal specifically with teaching and learning. Some sources contain practical information for developing training programs, whereas others reflect organizations' interests in competing in the global marketplace and managing an increasingly diverse work force. Several sources caution that efforts to celebrate or appreciate differences may ultimately reinforce stereotypes or cause members of some socially defined groups to be viewed as somehow different from the "mainstream." Promoting intercultural understanding is an important and complex topic that has ramifications for adult, career, and vocational education. (An annotated bibliography contains 20 references.)

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Promoting Intercultural Understanding Trends and Issues Alerts

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Promoting Intercultural Understanding

The skill of intercultural understanding might have once been applied primarily to understanding cultures outside the United States. Now it is also considered a skill for living and working in the United States. No longer is it fashionable to refer to the United States as a melting pot; instead, terms such as *mosaic* are used to describe a society that values individual differences and understands how these differences can make contributions to the larger whole (Rasmussen 1996). Such phrases as "we live in a global society," and "the composition of the work force is changing" are constant reminders of the need to promote intercultural understanding for use not only abroad but also within the United States. This *Trends and Issues Alert* highlights some of the trends in the literature related to intercultural understanding and provides a list of resources that can be used by adult, career, and vocational educators in promoting it.

Defining terms associated with culture and intercultural understanding is one trend. As a foundation for promoting intercultural understanding, several sources (Gray 1997; Gudykunst 1998; Ramsey 1996) define the term *culture*. All agree that culture is generally thought of as a system of beliefs, customs, and behaviors shared by a group of individuals. "Culture is the shared reality that individuals and groups value and accept as a guide for organizing their lives" (Ramsey 1996, p. 9); it is the "human part of the environment" (Gray 1997, p. 79). Gudykunst (1998) points out that because cultures are not homogeneous, subgroups—sometimes known as subcultures—exist within larger cultures. The terms *cultural/intercultural competence* are mentioned by a number of sources (e.g., Bender 1996; Misener et al. 1997; Mtika and Armstrong 1997; Taylor 1994). These terms refer to the need to develop an understanding and appreciation for cultures other than one's own.

Assisting individuals in developing intercultural competence is the basis for a number of sources that deal specifically with teaching and learning. Some sources (e.g., Carnevale and Kogod 1996; Rasmussen 1996; Seelye 1996) contain practical information such as activities and workshop outlines that can be used in developing training programs. A number of sources (e.g., Carnevale and Kogod 1996; Ewert, Rice, and Lauderdale 1995; Gallos and Ramsey 1997; Rasmussen 1996; Wentling and Palma-Rivas 1997a,b) focus specifically on diversity training. These reflect the interest of organizations in competing in the global marketplace and in managing an increasingly diverse work force (Wentling and Palma-Rivas 1997).

Several of the sources raise issues related to promoting intercultural understanding. Martin and Schreiber (1996) suggest that in an effort to celebrate or appreciate differences many multicultural curricula end up reinforcing stereotypes; in addition, "they ignore issues of power and a social structure that supports domination based on class, sexuality, gender and race" (p. 8). In a similar manner, Gallos and Ramsey (1997) discuss how, in diversity teaching and learning situations, members of some socially defined groups become "othered"—[that is, they end up] being seen as different in some way from the 'mainstream'" (p. 45).

Clearly, promoting intercultural understanding is an important and complex topic that has ramifications for adult, career, and vocational education. The sources listed here can be consulted for additional information.

Resources

Bender, D. E. *Intercultural Competence as a Competitive Advantage*. 1996. <http://alpha.fdu.edu/~bender/culture.html>

Increased awareness and understanding of different global cultures—what could be termed "intercultural competence"—can provide organizations with a competitive advantage. Strategies for developing intercultural competence include learning the language and geography and developing a historical perspective about the culture/nation.

Carnevale, A. P., and Kogod, S. K. *Tools and Activities for a Diverse Work Force*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996.

This compendium of strategies and resources addresses diversity in three areas: the individual, the interpersonal, and the organizational. The tools include assessments, awareness activities, skills development, and organizational strategies.

Dennett, M. "The Effect of Cultural Bias on the Adult Student's Self-Esteem." *Adult Learning* 6, no. 5 (May-June 1995): 29-30.

A multicultural learning environment has a powerful influence on self-esteem and can either support or damage it. Cultural awareness should be an educational component of all instruction.

Ewert, M.; Rice, J. K.; and Lauderdale, E. "Training for Diversity: How Organizations Become More Inclusive." *Adult Learning* 6, no. 5 (May-June 1995): 27-28.

Describes how cultural diversity affects organizations in the following ways: recruitment/retention of staff, the ability to extend beyond traditional clientele groups, management styles and decision-making processes, relationships within organizations, and organizational structures.

Gallos, J. V., and Ramsey, V. J., eds. *Teaching Diversity*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997.

This book brings together the voices of 17 individuals engaged in diversity education. By presenting honest and open accounts from the contributors, it offers the opportunity to look below the surface and behind the scenes at the diversity teaching and learning process. Its five sections cover preparing for diversity teaching, the nature of diversity teaching, the unique features of the diversity teaching and learning process, internal experiences of the diversity educator, how diversity educators keep themselves going, and reflections on the experience of diversity teaching.

Gray, A. "Modeling Transcultural Leadership for Transformational Change." *Journal for Vocational Special Needs Education* 19, no. 2 (Winter 1997): 78-84.

The transformational model for transcultural leadership is a progressive spiral that builds effective inter- and transcultural relationships. It progresses from monocultural isolationism, through monocultural awareness, intercultural interaction, and transcultural intersection.

Gudykunst, W. B. *Bridging Differences: Effective Intergroup Communication*. 3d ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998.

Designed as a textbook to aid understanding of intercultural communication, this book draws from current research and theory and shows readers how to apply the material toward the goal of more effective intergroup communication. Included are sections on understanding group differences and on nonverbal communication.

Lasonen, J., and Finch, C. R. "Evaluating an International Vocational Education Research Linkages A Case Study of Culture, Communication, and Collaboration." *International Journal of Vocational Education and Training* 3, no. 2 (Fall 1995): 51-71.

Interviews with five linkage participants from the United States, seven Finnish researchers, and four administrators identified perceptions of cultural collaboration competencies, differences in academic working styles, and the contribution of linkage to international collaborations. Recommendations were made for institutional linkage coordinators, ongoing assessments, and alignment of researchers having similar interests.

Martin, R. and Schreiber, T. *Other Colors: Stories of Women Immigrants*. Albuquerque, NM: Other Colors Project, 1996.

This teaching packet, two audiotapes and a teacher's guide, is designed to illuminate some experiences and perspectives of women immigrants. The interviews demonstrate the way cultures interweave and how identities are permeable and subject to change. The guide is designed to facilitate dialogue in order to change the way women immigrants are regarded and to redefine "multiculturalism."

Misener, T. R.; Sowell, R. L.; Phillips, K. D.; and Harris, C. "Sexual Orientation: A Cultural Diversity Issue for Nursing." *Nursing Outlook* 45, no. 4 (July-August 1997): 178-181.

Traditional approaches to cultural diversity and the development of a culturally aware work force have consistently ignored the importance of gender role orientation and sexual orientation as sources of potential conflict in the work environment. The profession of nursing should take steps to end personal and professional discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Mtika, A., and Armstrong, J. E. "Issues in the Cultural Competency of Head Start's Food and Nutrition Service." *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences* 89, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 2-5.

A study of attitudes related to cultural awareness of Head Start staff and staff-parent cross-cultural interactions in Head Start found similarities and differences between caregivers and staff in attitudes about using ethnic foods in Head Start menus, providing education about ethnic foods, and incorporating caregivers' ideas into program planning were discussed relative to enhancing food and nutrition services.

Ramsey, S. "Creating a Context: Methodologies in Intercultural Teaching and Training." In *Experiential Activities for Intercultural Learning*, vol. 1, edited by H. N. Seelye. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1996.

Provides an overview of theory and research about intercultural teaching and training and describes strategies and methods for use in developing learning experiences.

Rasmussen, T. *The ASTD Trainer's Sourcebook: DIVERSITY*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996.

This book provides trainers information needed to plan and implement diversity training. Included are detailed guides for workshops of varying lengths; handouts, activities, assessments, and overheads for use in the workshops; and a list of recommended resources for continued learning.

Rodrigues, C. A. "Developing Expatriates' Cross-Cultural Sensitivity: Cultures Where 'Your Culture's OK' Is Really Not OK." *Journal of Management Development* 16, no. 9 (1997): 690-702.

Because different societies hold different views, a managerial style that works in one culture will not necessarily work in another and adaptations must be made accordingly. Cross-cultural managers need to develop a "my culture's OK, your culture's OK" frame of reference unless the other's culture really is not OK. In that case, the manager needs to identify and implement programs to change the culture to "really OK."

Seelye, H. N., ed. *Experiential Activities for Intercultural Learning*, vol. 1. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1996.

This volume, designed for teachers and trainers, begins with an essay that discusses intercultural learning theory and practice followed by 32 practical activities to engender understanding and skill in intercultural contact. The activities are divided into the following sections: getting into focus, knowing yourself as a cultural person, courting the intercultural perspective, working together, analyzing cross-cultural incidents, and returning home.

Spinks, N., and Wells, B. "Intercultural Communication: A Key Element in Global Strategies." *Career Development International* 2, no. 6 (1997): 287-282.

Communication crossing national boundaries is not necessarily different from any other communication activity; however, intercultural communication is different. Many cultural factors (differences in customs, dress, religion, class, work ethic, and privacy) and language differences in oral, written, and nonverbal communication as well as semantics influence cross-cultural communication.

Taylor, E. W. "Intercultural Competency: A Transformative Learning Process." *Adult Education Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (Spring 1994): 154-174.

Intercultural competency is an adaptive capacity based on an inclusive and integrative world view that allows participants to accommodate the demands of living in a host culture effectively. From interviews with 12 U.S. adults who successfully lived in another culture emerged a model of the learning process for intercultural competence. Its components are setting the stage, cultural disequilibrium, cognitive orientation, learning strategies, and evolving intercultural identity.

Vielba, C. A., and Edelshain, D. J. "Are Business Schools Meeting the Challenge of International Communication?" *Journal of Management Development* 16, no. 2 (1997): 80-92.

A survey of 50 United Kingdom and 40 continental Europe business schools and 71 U. K. business students revealed that far more European than U.K. schools think foreign languages are integral to business administration education and that international business training is heavily Anglocentric. Students' opinions were closer to those of European business schools.

Wentling, R. M., and Palma-Rivas, N. *Current Status of Diversity Initiatives in Selected Multinational Corporations. Diversity in the Workforce Series Report #3*. Berkeley, CA: National Center for Research in Vocational Education, 1997a. (ED 414 475)

Semistructured interviews of diversity managers and analysis of annual reports in eight U. S.-based multinational corporations identified the factors that influenced diversity in these corporations and their diversity initiatives.

Wentling, R. M., and Palma-Rivas, N. *Diversity in the Workforce: A Literature Review. Diversity in the Workforce Series Report #1*. Berkeley, CA: National Center for Research in Vocational Education, 1997b. (ED 414 473)

The literature on diversity in the work force was reviewed to determine the complexity and breadth of workplace diversity issues and identify trends in diversity management and training.

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