The Need to Train Students Intercultural Competence for International Mobility Stage

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Abstract: The concern for the training of intercultural competence has become more and more accentuated because in the contemporary society we are witnessing a significant increase in student mobility. In countries such as France or Germany teachers have created special programs for training this competence for students that studying in a different culture. It was found that such intercultural competence training programs help students to better understand the characteristics of the cultures and the differences between them, to respect them and to integrate better. Possessing intercultural competence allows students to better manage relationships in a multicultural space. The goal of this paper is to explain the notion of intercultural competence and its importance for students who will participate in international mobility.

Keywords: *intercultural competence; training program; students; international mobility.*

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Introduction

Intercultural interactions are a part of everyday life, becoming more and more globalized, intercultural competence being conceived in this case the ability to interact effectively and appropriately in an intercultural situation or context.

Due to the massive mobilities in the university education, emphasis is placed on the formation of the students' intercultural competence, which represents the answer to the challenges that may arise during a mobility period in a different culture. The possession of intercultural competence can positively influence the relations between the members of different cultures and can help the students to integrate easily into the new culture.

The purpose of this article is to know the concept of competence and the importance of training it for students participating in intercultural mobility.

Intercultural Competence

Since 1960, the concept of intercultural competence has come to the attention of researchers in the specialty literature. During this period, Rachel D. DuBois was the first author to establish intercultural programs to help cultural groups to each other. The study of intercultural competence was extended through the various contributions made to the field by researchers, such as: Spitzberg, Changnon, 2009; Darla K. Deardorff, 2005, 2006, 2009 (Deardorff & Arasaratnam, 2017).

Intercultural competence is also known as international competence, intercultural sensitivity or intercultural communication, but intercultural competence remains the most used term in the specialty literature, thus trying to define it over time by different researchers (McRae and Ramji, 2011, *as cited by* Trede, Bowles, Bridges, 2013).

The specialty literature presents various approaches to the concept, but in this article we will summarize some of them.

Intercultural competence is a complex of skills needed to perform effectively and adequately in the interaction with others who, linguistically and culturally, are different from each other (Fantini, 2007).

Nedelcu (2008:28) defines intercultural competence as "a set of specific intercultural beliefs and behaviors that advocate for openness, empathy and communication, for understanding and enhancing the logic of each culture, near or far, for the perception and respect of otherness in all its differentiating elements"

As Gulick, Herman (2007), Abbe and Gallus (2012) point out, intercultural competences represent "a set of attitudes and behaviors that, once acquired, allow us to act effectively in culturally different contexts and situations" (Gulick, Herman, 2007; Abbe, Gallus, 2012, *as cited by* Marinescu, 2015).

1. The elements of intercultural competence

In the work *Intercultural Competences. Conceptual and operational Framework* (Wendy, 2013), intercultural competence refers to having relevant knowledge about certain cultures, as well as having general knowledge about the types of problems that arise when the members of the cultures interact differently. Intercultural competence also means having attitudes that are necessary in interacting and maintaining contact with people from different cultures, as well as skills to understand other cultures.

Bennet points out that theorists in the field characterize intercultural competence as a set of cognitive skills, abilities, and affective and behavioral characteristics that effectively and adequately support interaction in a variety of cultural contexts (Bennet, 2008, *as cited by* Perry, Southwell, 2011).

If we analyze Deardorff's (2009) model of intercultural competence, we find that, following a survey, the elements of intercultural competence were classified by experts into three basic elements: attitudes, knowledge and skills. The author also points out that the significant point of the development of intercultural competence is the element of attitudes (Deardorff, 2009, *as cited by* Gopal, 2011). Each element of intercultural competence is described in the following lines:

Attitudes - the first basic element in the process of acquiring intercultural competence is attitude. When faculty members prepare to learn interculturally, it is essential to learn to respect and value other cultures. It is also important to examine their intrinsic motivation for openness to other cultures.

The attitudes are as follows:

- capitalizing on other cultures;
- motivation;
- openness to other cultures;
- ethnocentricity;

Knowledge - It is the second element of the dynamic process of developing intercultural competence. Develops culture-specific knowledge and includes the following:

- cultural self-awareness;

- knowledge about culture;
- knowledge of gender roles;
- basic linguistic knowledge;

Skills - are the third element in the process of developing intercultural competence. These involve self-reflection, reflexivity and develop one of the communication skills. These are important for processing knowledge about one's own culture, as well as others.

- self-reflection;
- reflexivity;
- communication skills (Gopal, 2011).

We can say that having these three main elements of intercultural competence helps people entering a different cultural context to understand the characteristics of the culture and to respect them, to interact with members of different cultures and to integrate more easily into the host culture.

From the above definitions, it is found that an intercultural competence means the proper management of the interaction between people of different cultures both from the cultural point of view, as well as from the affective, cognitive and behavioral point of view (Sia, 2015).

As most researchers say, intercultural competence is the ability to interact effectively and appropriately in an intercultural situation or context (Perry & Southwell, 2011).

Therefore, we can find the intercultural competence useful in that it encourages interaction and dialogue with the members of the groups belonging to different cultures, while also allowing a better management of the relations in an intercultural space.

Studies that demonstrate the need to training intercultural competence

There are numerous studies in the international specialty literature that support the training of students' intercultural competence, which is of major importance in the international mobility stages.

The authors of the article *Developing an intercultural competence program at an international cross-border university* (Hiller, & Woźniak, 2009) consider intercultural competence one of the most requested competences. Following a survey in Germany, it has been shown that a large number of foreign students drop out of studies. Thus, the German universities have developed strategies to sensitize students from an intercultural point of view. Viadrina University in Frankfurt is one of the universities that has created a program

of training of intercultural competence, whose experience can be transferred to other university institutions. The training of intercultural competences is a fundamental necessity for the exchange of students' experiences. Therefore, it is necessary for students to prepare their intercultural skills as early as possible in order to cope with the cultural differences that may arise during a period of mobility.

As shown in the article *Innovative methods for promoting and assessing intercultural competence in higher education* (Hiller, 2010), the intercultural competence training program aims to prepare students for the challenges they may face during international mobility periods.

The program emerged from the perception that an institution such as the Viadrina European University should provide measures to promote intercultural competence in which students come from several countries, making it a key internationally recognized qualification.

The program has gained the involvement of as many students as possible in order to promote intercultural interaction on campus and to prepare their intercultural competence. In addition to the workshops and intercultural training sessions, there are activities such as international group projects, summer courses, cultural events or trips. But these types of activities primarily attract students who are interested in engaging in intercultural exchange.

Therefore, we can see from the two articles, which presents the program created by Viadrina University, that the training of intercultural competence is necessary for students to cope in extremely interconnected international contexts during the study or in their subsequent career.

France is another country where universities focus on training intercultural competence for internships of international mobility. We can deduce this from the article *Designing an intercultural program to prepare students to study abroad* (Zumbihl, 2010), this program aiming to develop students' knowledge about culture and to manage the misunderstandings that may arise during the internship.

Intercultural competence prepares students to live in a multicultural society and offers them the opportunity to create interpersonal contacts that represent the key elements in the field of education.

We conclude that the training of the intercultural competence is a fundamental basis for the accomplishment of an internship of international mobility, producing positive effects in the experiences of the interns students, leading also to the increase of the motivation to realize such an internship, these things being supported by the studies carried out in this field.

Conclusions

The existing studies in the specialty literature targeting intercultural competence demonstrate the importance of its training for students participating in international mobility.

Therefore, the article brings to the attention of the teachers and also the students interested in international mobility the importance of the training of this competence, so that the students know the cultures in which they are going to carry out their mobility stage, in order to easily integrate into the new host culture, to meet the challenges that may arise during the internship and to interact as best as possible with the members of the host cultures.

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