

Strategies for Cross-Cultural Competence, Connectedness, and Collaboration

Getting to the Five C's

by Holly Arida

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At the age of 19, after completing my first year of college, my father approached me with a job offer. A family friend, living in Jordan, was working for a global logistics company that wanted to open a franchise in the Detroit area. Would I want to run it? I don't remember hesitating; the prospect seemed exciting and challenging, and I felt confident in my abilities. Our office opened within a couple of months, and I began a fourteen-year journey in international business leadership that ended only when I chose to become an educator.

For those of us trying to find solutions to the exponentially growing demands for global education, some answers lie in my own experience. Virtually out of high school, what were the skills that allowed me to prosper on the global playing field? I did not have much business experience and certainly knew little about international shipping at age 19, but my indispensable assets were my "cross-cultural competence", the ability to work in multi-cultural situations, and the sense of connectedness I felt with the overseas clients and partners with whom I collaborated around the world. My cross-cultural competence derived from key life experiences: living abroad and growing up in diverse communities within the United States. These instilled a strong sense of connectedness to the world and a respect and understanding for what I could learn from people who were "different" from me. My father, an immigrant to the U.S., was also involved in international business intermittently throughout my upbringing, so the language of global business and my own transnational identity made me comfortable with navigating other cultures.

To be sure, we cannot equip each of our students with immigrant parents and overseas experiences, but here I will present ways that learning institutions can simulate some of these experiences by drawing upon existing resources and retooling our approach to global education.

There is virtually no field of study or job area for our students that will be left unaffected by the "Flat World" phenomenon described by Thomas Friedman, and our global education strategies need to reflect this reality. To make sure our students stay ahead, in a game that seems to be outpacing educational systems in terms of change, we need to reorient our approach in a number of ways.

The primary change is to shift toward educational strategies that achieve cross-cultural skills valuable in the global marketplace by putting knowledge and awareness into practice. This means drawing on existing resources in the learning environment: cross-cultural experiences of our students, diversity, and empathy. Simulating the "international life" through education provides students with capabilities and confidence in what I call the "5C" 21st-Century skills:

- **cross-cultural competence:** the ability to maneuver in a number of cultures
- **collaboration:** the ability to work with others over transnational boundaries
- **connectedness:** the ability to relate to other cultures and people.

Overview of Cross-Cultural Competence

The table on the next page outlines the five levels of cross-cultural competence, which foster connectedness and global collaboration. Although they are not strictly sequential, it is the last level, cross-cultural skills, that will assure our students a spot on the global playing field. The building blocks for functioning competency in another culture are learned in a spiraling process and should take place both in and out of the classroom.

There is a great distance between the starting point at which students indicate an open attitude by walking into a Language 101 or Global Studies course to the final destination, where they possess the cross-cultural skills to interact socially with international clients, clinch a business deal or innovate a design, and work together to solve problems transnationally. Students maneuvering across cultures in their future careers will need the skills to answer a multitude of practical questions such as these:

- How do you interpret and then respond to an angry e-mail from an overseas customer or partner?
- What sort of payment or contract terms indicate a lack of trust that might be offensive to a client in another country?
- What are the politics of the country and how volatile is the region in which you are operating?
- Is it culturally acceptable to discuss political volatility or is it insulting?
- What is the informed, culturally-proficient way to handle complex situations as they arise that will enhance rather than damage your relationship?

These are serious issues that cannot be handled by a novice when

Building Blocks	Characteristics of Cross-Cultural Competence
Open Attitude	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tolerance and curiosity about other cultures. • Seeking knowledge. • Multi-dimensional understanding. • Overcoming stereotyping. • Developing a “productive” approach to other cultures.
Self-Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflecting on our own cultural practices. • Critiquing our own “attitude” and practices. • Examining how false cultural “assumptions” can damage working relationships and inhibit success across cultures.
Other-Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizing how actions of others reflect cultural norms. • Identifying the expectations of counterpart in other culture. • Finding places where cultural practices overlap. • Assessing how to build respect and working relationships.
Cultural Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obtaining specific information about politics, history, social practices, conflict resolution, sources of inspiration, and attitudes toward achievement in the culture. • Establishing reliable sources of information about the culture.
Cross-Cultural Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transforming awareness and knowledge into actual skills. • Honing capacity to work across cultures. • Forging path toward continual refinement of skills.

From *Doing Business Internationally, the Guide to Cross-Cultural Success*¹

a commercial deal, an international partnership, or a career might be at stake. As global educators, we must prepare our students for these types of questions by finding effective ways for them to achieve functioning cross-cultural competency and reach beyond, to proficiency.

The Power of Empathy

For global educators, empathy can be the bridge to cross-cultural competence because it allows students to “walk in the shoes” of people living in another culture.

Empathy is a universal language and key to global understanding. Although mastery of a world language can open doors to a culture, it is a lengthy process, which can be outmoded by the constant shifts in the global marketplace. For example, many schools in Michigan followed trends in the automotive industry; thus, in the 1980’s they offered Japanese courses, followed by German after the Daimler-Chrysler deal, and now Chinese. Also, with a global workforce you might, for example, be dealing with a company in Dubai, but communicating with Indian project managers there, who speak English or a Hindi dialect, not Arabic. Proficiency in a world language might be an asset, but empathy is also an effective and versatile tool to access another culture.

Global educators must rely on the power of empathy because it is a vital tool with a lasting impact in cross-cultural understanding and a highly valuable 21st-Century skill. As right-brain guru Daniel Pink explains in his groundbreaking work *A Whole New Mind*:

Today, cheap and widespread online access, combined with all of those overseas global knowledge workers, are making the attributes measurable by IQ much easier to replace— which... has meant that aptitudes more difficult to replicate are becoming more valuable. And the one aptitude that’s proven impossible for computers

to reproduce, and very difficult for faraway workers connected by electrons to match, is Empathy.²

Those that can make the human connection will be valuable in the global marketplace. Empathy or the related “E.Q.” does not replace the classic IQ because, as Pink explains, “Sometimes we need detachment; many other times we need attunement. And the people who will thrive will be those who can toggle between the two...”³ However,

Empathy is much more than a vocational skill necessary for surviving twenty-first century labor markets. It’s an ethic for living. It’s a means of understanding other human beings... a universal language that connects us beyond country or culture. Empathy makes us human...⁴

Global educators need to use the power of empathy to their advantage. Empathy can circumvent language barriers, national boundaries, and cultural differences. Drawing out this “natural” resource can help a student achieve cross-cultural competence. Attunement to global counterparts is a skill that students need to learn, hone, and practice.

Getting to the 5C’s

Here are strategies for global educators to empower students with cross-cultural competence, connectedness and collaboration through empathy.

The table on the next page breaks down each stage of cross-cultural competence with specific recommendations for global educators to help students achieve them.

At the beginning stage, **Open Attitude**, it is important to provide “the hook” that leaves students with a clear sense of why the culture or region you are introducing is significant *to them*, in other words, creating a sense of *connectedness*. You can con-

continued on next page

The Five C's*continued from previous page*

Stage	Strategies
Open Attitude	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acclimate students to stereotypes about the culture. • Offer students authentic voices from the region. • Explain clear benefits of cross-cultural understanding. • Convey importance of the culture/region to the student.
Self-Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey student opinions about other cultures. • Allow students to give voice to their misperceptions. • Train students to think about the role of cultural perspectives. • Encourage students to give voice to their own cross-cultural experiences.
Other-Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draw on previous multicultural experience of student. • Utilize cross-cultural interchanges. • Emphasize dialogue about "other" cultures. • Recognize differences/similarities about culture.
Cultural Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilize interdisciplinary approach. • Position student to understand that cultural knowledge is fluid, not fixed. • Guide students to find reliable people and institutions in their community. • Emphasize media literacy skills.
Cross-Cultural Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create experiential cross-cultural leadership programs. • Role play cross-cultural interchanges. • Utilize international video-conferencing tools to build bridges. • Partner with other learning institutions or companies to build relations between students and educators. • Establish internships abroad or with local global businesses. • Network in your community and use multicultural resources.

nect students to the culture by drawing them to the economic, political, or humanitarian aspects that affect their everyday lives. Two examples: the emergence of Asia and subsequent labor outsourcing has an economic impact on student careers, and conflict in the Middle East is tied to the upcoming elections in the U.S. Another dimension of connectedness is where students identify stereotypes. This is best achieved by exposure to indigenous voices from the region, either in person or on film or television. Also, students need to connect to their own process of developing cross-cultural competence and understand that the objective is acquiring the skills to function with proficiency on the global playing field.

It is not too simplistic to begin the **Self-Awareness** stage with a survey or "quiz" that provides students with an opportunity for introspection about another culture. Using empathy as a vehicle here means encouraging students to reflect on their own cross-cultural experiences: Are they born of immigrant parents or grandparents? Do they have a diverse group of friends and what are their friends' experiences? When have they been misperceived or stereotyped? Contemplations of this nature establish further connectedness as students begin to see reflections of their own cross-cultural experiences.

The phase of **Other-Awareness** is intertwined with Self-Awareness. My most powerful example of this is from a graduate course I taught on "Culture and Doing Business in the Middle East". A student from the Balkans spoke very emotionally about the way he was discriminated against and verbally assaulted following 9/11 because he was perceived in his community as being Arab. The absurd story of this Albanian student enduring anti-Arab epithets and having a mother shielding her child from him at a gas station because he was "dangerous" illuminated for all of us listening the profound need for cultural understanding of "the other". I hear very often from

students that something they've learned about a new culture reminds them of their own upbringing, how their roommate lives or how their family "back home" used to do things. As global educators, we tend to think globally, reaching to the outside world for strategies to foster global understanding, but through the power of empathy, the answers can lie in the multicultural experiences that students already have. Many of our schools and universities have dedicated considerable effort to building diverse student populations and faculty. Capitalizing on this diversity connects students to the rest of the world to explore new cultures through open discourse, self-reflection and empathy.

For **Cultural Knowledge** to translate into global skills, students need a comprehensive approach to the culture. This means that while looking at the economic situation and studying business practices in a region, students should be following the political situation in the country's newspapers, reading literature from indigenous writers, and learning about the religious practices and local customs through films, speakers, visits to local ethnic communities, or international video-conferencing. In this way, students understand that cultures are complicated and organic. As global educators, we can also capitalize on another existing resource—the Internet. Like never before, students have access to information emanating from all over the world. But cultural knowledge means honing media literacy skills in our students— particularly when it comes to international sources. Guiding students to reliable sources and providing them with the ability to assess the validity of information as they continue to explore the culture is key to building this phase of cross-cultural competence.

On the global playing field, our students will not be tourists or spectators—they will be competitors who need to know how to play the game with confidence and skill. Global educators

The Five C's *continued from previous page*

must focus on getting to the final stage, **Cross-Cultural Skills**, because awareness and knowledge are useless without the ability to put them into practice. Cross-cultural collaboration and empathy grow simultaneously. Experiential educational opportunities that demand cross-cultural collaboration are essential. Leadership programs on campus can take advantage of diversity within the student population or can work in conjunction with other learning institutions. Through role play, I have had students enact possible cross-cultural business interactions that put their knowledge into practice without ever leaving campus.

Partnerships with international schools or companies with global operations provide students with real-life work experience in a global context or the opportunity to find solutions across cultures. How do you work on a project or solve problems with people who are different than you? Through an international partnership at my school, we recently sent students for internships at the parent company of the school we partner with in Turkey. Working, not just studying, in a foreign country has built confidence and skills, allowing these students to pursue their international interests.

Functioning Cross-Culturally and Beyond

By using the universal language of empathy and building upon the multi-cultural and media resources we already have in our schools or universities and communities, global educators can amp students up from the early stages of knowledge and awareness about other cultures, to the "5C" skills they will need in the 21st Century. Our students' education needs to be the international life that gives them the confidence and global know-how for their future. Students need more efficient and effective strategies to build the kind of cross-cultural competence and connectedness that translates into proficiency, in order for them to collaborate transnationally and compete in a worldwide labor pool with success. Nothing less than the future of the American workforce is at stake. •

Endnotes

1. Danielle Medina Walker, Thomas Walker, and Joerg Schmitz., *Doing Business Internationally*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003), pp. 34-36.
2. Daniel Pink, *A Whole New Mind: Why the Right Brainers Will Rule the Future* (New York: Penguin Group, 2005), p. 161.
3. Pink, p. 174.
4. Pink, p. 165.

Conference in Iowa *continued from page 15*

We have been discussing the possibility of applying for a Title VI grant to support the International Institute and other international activities on campus. The information I gained from the conference will make this a much better proposal and increase the benefit from any grant that we do receive. As we consider our funding options, we will also want to consider how we might collaborate with this wonderful resource (the MIIIE) in order to create a stronger program. •

International Rumi Year

The famous Persian poet, jurist, and theologian Jalal al-Din Rumi was born 800 years ago this month, on September 30, 1207, in what is now Afghanistan. His teachings inspired the spread of Muslim and Sufi thought, and the rise of ascetic dervish fraternities in Turkey and other countries. UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) has declared 2007 as International Rumi Year in celebration of this anniversary.

The following poem by Rumi has been freely translated by Coleman Barks, and appears in his We Are Three: New Rumi Poems (Athens, GA: Maypop Books, 1987), p. 25.

We can't help being thirsty,
moving toward the voice
of water.

Milk-drinkers draw close
to the mother. Muslims, Christians, Jews,
Buddhists, Hindus, shamans,
everyone hears the intelligent sound
and moves, with thirst, to meet it.

Clean your ears. Don't listen
for something you've heard before.

Invisible camel bells,
slight footfalls in sand.

Almost in sight! The first word they call out
will be the last word of our last poem.

"One Great Tapestry" *continued from page 9*

ted them to become involved with showing their work is a story as diverse and interesting as the art itself. I am always honored to meet each artist and to share in this process with them.

As exhibit curator I was contacted by a spokesperson from The Michigan Roundtable for Diversity and Inclusion. During the interview process I was asked about outcomes. What did I feel would be the positive outcome of presenting the exhibition on diversity? Without the tools to measure, I can only hope it helped raise questions in the minds of the viewers. Several of my students attended the opening and wrote reviews on the show. Our field trip was the topic of discussion in class as students had a variety of responses to viewing the art. That discussion in itself was a step in the right direction.

I once heard that change comes about from many people doing the small things that will one day lead to a major shift in the thinking of the world. I am grateful to Madonna University for allowing me to curate shows on important social issues, and to all the artists, volunteers, and writers who helped bring about the amazing success of our show. •