UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO-BICOCCA

COURSE SYLLABUS

Intercultural Capacity

2627-2-F8702N016

Learning objectives

The intercultural communication component of the curriculum of intercultural relations iof the degree Progest s constituted by two interconnecting parts taught by prof. Ida Castiglioni and by prof. Milton Bennett, “Intercultural Communication”and “Intercultural Capacity,”respectively.

The main objective of the Intercultural Capacity course (Prof. Bennett) is to establish the relationship among perceptual development, intercultural sensitivity, and intercultural competence. The intersection of these concepts explains and guides how people develop greater competence in dealing with cultural “otherness”.

Making Judgements
The student will be able to develop critical and reflective autonomy in understanding and managing cultural differences, applying the Dynamic Model of Intercultural Sensitivity to assess situations of cultural otherness and complexity. They will be capable of integrating ethnorelative perspectives to make informed and sustainable decisions in multicultural and professional contexts, recognizing and negotiating cultural conflicts and value differences.

Communication Skills
The student will acquire effective communication skills to interact respectfully, clearly, and adaptively in complex intercultural contexts. They will be able to use communication strategies that promote inclusion and mutual understanding, both in formal and informal settings, and to present reflections and project outcomes clearly to interlocutors from diverse cultural backgrounds.
Learning skills
The tools provided during the course provide an excellent foundation for building a thoughtful experience of intercultural encounters and diversity management in organizations throughout a professional career.

Contents

The first part of the course will provide with competencies for describing and interpreting the main aspects of a culture; for the majority of people this still means referring mainly to its symbols and its “objective aspects”. From an intercultural viewpoint, we’ll talk about subjective aspects of culture through the development of so called etic categories of observation. 1) the pragmatic use of language; 2) nonverbal communication; 3) communication styles; 4) conflict styles; 5) perceptual (cognitive) styles; 6) value orientations.
The second part of the course will explicate Milton Bennett’s Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity in terms of constructivist perception theory and its application to exercising competence in intercultural relations. The model differentiates “ethnocentrism”—the denial of, defense against, or minimization of cultural otherness, and “ethnorelativism”– the acceptance of, adaptation to, or integration of cultural otherness. Movement through the stages is explained in terms of recognizing and reconciling dichotomies such as stability and change, and unity and diversity. The reconciliation of issues in ethnorelativism generates a form of ethicality that is well-adapted to intercultural and multicultural situations, which in turn is a necessary guide for personal development and change agentry in small and large organizations.

Detailed program

Research in the field of intercultural communication of the last 25 years, shows our interconnected and multicultural world demands both an intercultural mindset and an intercultural skillset. The intercultural skillset is necessary for communicating effectively and appropriately in a variety of cultural settings, both in international cross-border initiatives (e.g. international cooperation) and in domestic multicultural workforce management (e.g. increasingly social services are becoming multicultural in Italy and in Europe).The ability to use a framework for learning to learn is crucial in order to be able to identify potential misunderstandings (not only between different national/ethnic cultures, but also disciplinary differences, for instance) or areas of appropriate behavior. Also, current reserach shows how intercultural competence is associated to different stages of evolution. Where we are on this hypothetical continuum affects how and what we can learn from contact with intercultiural difference. This is defined as Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennett, 2001).
The debate on intercultural competence will be accompanied by reflections and exercises in order to generate in the group a larger intercultural capacity.

Prerequisites

Course faculty strongly encourage class attendance.

A basic knowledge of International English language is necessary as the **course is taught in English.**

Erasmus students are welcome. They are invited however to come to class and follow through with actual presence and reading of assigned materials.

Teaching methods

The course is organized through intial presentations and group discussions, followed by structured exercises. Every exercise creates the opportunity to apply different competences and to discuss implications both at a personal and professional level. Participants are encouraged to bring their own case studies to class in order to better understand the leverages to value cultural diversity and how to face natural resistance to change.
Structured exercises will provide the opportunity to “make experience” of every developmental position of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity: the experience of perceiving cultural difference; the experience of

creating categories; the experience of the cultural context; the experience of alternative cultural frameworks; and the experience of choosing one’s cultural frame.
Frontal classes are about 50%, while the interactive part will constitute the remaining 50%.
10% of classes will be taught remotely. Students will be prepared during the first part of the course to interact in the remote section of the course which will be partly syncronous and partly asincronous.

Assessment methods

Class participation is considered to be a positive and important factor for a successul result. Classes are usually highly international thus providing the perfect intercultural lab.
Ongoing Assessment
The course includes a number of short individual and group assignments completed throughout the semester. These assignments are not individually graded but contribute to the student's learning portfolio and provide opportunities for discussion and feedback during class.
The examination consists of an oral interview, which provides an opportunity to interact with the student in order to assess their critical understanding of the course topics and their ability to connect theoretical concepts with practical applications.
The final grade is based on the overall performance across the different assessment components and is awarded according to the following scale:
18: Barely sufficient knowledge; minimal application and interpretation skills.
19–22: Satisfactory knowledge of the fundamental concepts, with some uncertainty in their application.
23–26: Good knowledge of the subject matter; sound application skills with minor inaccuracies.
30 e lode: conoscenza pienamente adeguata, piena padronanza, eccellente proprietà di linguaggio.

Professor Ida Castiglioni will be the referent for final exams.

Textbooks and Reading Materials

Bennett, M. (2025). A constructivist reframing of intercultural communication. Intercultural Communication Review, Rikkyo University

Bennett, M. (2013) Basic concepts of intercultural communication: Paradigms, principles, and practices. Intercultural Press.
OR, AS ALTERNATIVE: Liu, S, Volcic, Z., & Gallois, C. (Eds.) (2023). Introducing intercultural communication: Global cultures and contexts. Sage.

Non-attending students must also read:

Bennett, M. (2025). The developmental model of intercultural sensitivity for experiencing otherness. In S. Liu, A. Komisarof, Z. Hua, & L. Opijiofor (Eds.), Sage handbook of intercultural communication (pp. 3-17). Sage.

Bennett, M. (2024). The perceptual construction of otherness and cultural complexity. In Conference proceedings, Living within diversities: Cultures and new complexities, April 5, 2024, Florence, Italy (pp. 71-99). Intercultura Foundation.

Bennett, M. (2013). “Stereotypes/generalizations.” In C. Cortes (Ed) Multicultural America: A multimedia encyclopedia. Sage.

Bennett, M. (2013). “Ethnocentrism/xenophobia.” In C. Cortes (Ed) Multicultural America: A multimedia

encyclopedia. Sage.

all articles will be uploaded on the e-learning platform

Sustainable Development Goals

QUALITY EDUCATION | GENDER EQUALITY | REDUCED INEQUALITIES | SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES