

Yao-Yi Fu

# Factors that contribute to tourism students' development of intercultural competence

## Abstract

*This study explores factors and contexts that helped students to develop intercultural competence from participating in the global service-learning experience. The Deardorff Process Model of Intercultural Competence was adopted as the conceptual framework of this research and guided its assessment of students' intercultural competence. The conceptual framework proposes 15 elements of intercultural competence that include respect, openness, tolerance for ambiguity, flexibility, curiosity and discovery, withholding judgment, cultural self-awareness/understanding, understanding others' worldviews, culture-specific knowledge, sociolinguistic awareness, skills to listen, observe and interpret, skills to analyze, evaluate, and relate, empathy, adaptability, and communication skills. This study involves a three-week service-learning course that was offered in Kenya. The class included lectures, discussions, field trips, and research activities that resulted in a tourism development project for the Rift Valley in Kenya. Given the increasing attention to students' development of intercultural competence, educational institutions are searching for means to help students become interculturally competent. Tourism students in the service-learning course were asked to reflect on their experience three times during the three-week period in Kenya. Results of students' evaluations on their development of intercultural competence produced data that help to identify critical factors or contexts that contribute to their development. This paper aims to share what was learned about students' development of intercultural competence and to stimulate further research on relevant topics.*

*Key words: intercultural competence; global service-learning; study abroad; Kenya*

## Introduction

As the world has become ever-increasingly interconnected and interdependent, a rising number of educational institutions are seeking ways to foster "global-ready students" so they are able to relate to and interact with people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds (Deardorff, 2008; Musil, 2007; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). This is certainly a vital goal for tourism faculty to achieve so that students are ready for hundreds of career possibilities in the diverse global tourism industry. In order to design courses or programs that help students develop intercultural competence, educators need to know factors that contribute to that development. Although the concept of intercultural competence has been extensively discussed in the literature, there is a lack of empirical research that examines factors that influence students' development of this competence.

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Yao-Yi Fu, Department of Tourism, Conventions, and Event Management, Indiana University, Indianapolis, USA;  
E-mail: yafu@iupui.edu

This paper presents key factors identified by a tourism department in the U.S. based its students' participation in a global service-learning program that took place in Kenya. These study findings provide suggestions for designing courses or programs that offer intercultural learning.

## Cultivating intercultural competence through global service-learning

International service-learning offers a unique opportunity for students to develop intercultural competence. By participating in service-learning abroad, students interact directly with other cultures, challenge their knowledge and perceptions about themselves and host communities, discover new ideas, and develop new skills and abilities (Musil, 2007; Bringle & Hatcher, 2011). A tourism department of a university in the United States offered a global service-learning course that involved a tourism development project in the Rift Valley in Kenya. The tourism department has a partnership with the School of Tourism, Hospitality and Events Management at Moi University in Kenya on research and teaching. This service-learning course was a collaboration between the two tourism programs to assist tourism development in the Rift Valley in Kenya. There are social problems that many communities in the Rift Valley are facing, such as high poverty levels, high unemployment rates, low wages, high cost of healthcare, high illiteracy levels, poor infrastructure, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The purpose of the tourism project was to suggest ideas that will help to develop community-based tourism that will improve the local economy, infrastructure, and quality of life for local residents.

There were three students enrolled in this global service-learning course. One faculty member and the three students traveled to Kenya and stayed there for three weeks of one summer. The class activities included lectures, class discussions, field trips, and research undertakings that culminated in a written report which provides recommendations for tourism development in the Rift Valley. By the end of the three-week visit, students built a blog and a Facebook page that document and promote tourism resources for the area. In order to investigate tourism resources available in the Rift Valley, the group visited several places that have a potential for visitors who look for cultural, sports, and outdoor opportunities. In order to understand local challenges and needs, students met with residents in several communities to discuss how tourism development can help them. Additionally, while visiting several local communities for gathering residents' opinions about tourism development in the Rift Valley, students were invited to visit two elementary schools where they delivered several presentations to Kenyan students about life in America.

This global service-learning course was designed to provide cultural immersion opportunities for the American students. It was believed that the experience would help students to develop intercultural competence that is vital for their career development in the tourism industry. During the entire three-week stay, the American students worked directly with Kenyan students and faculty for hours per day on a daily basis. Students from the two countries engaged in all class activities together. The continuous interactions between the American students and Kenyans facilitated many discussions whereby participants from both countries exchanged knowledge and views about socioeconomic, cultural, and political conditions in both countries.

## Factors that influence outcomes of education abroad

Many researchers (Paige, 1993; Engle & Engle, 2003; Medlina-Lopez-Portillo, 2004; Bennett, 2008; Hoff, 2008; Gillespie, Braskamp & Dwyer, 2009) have explored factors that influence outcomes of study abroad. The outcomes can be separated into two broad categories: academic and non-academic outcomes. The academic outcomes include skills and knowledge that can be discipline-specific (Hoff, 2008). The non-academic outcomes include intercultural sensitivity, intercultural awareness, affective and attitudinal change, and personal growth. Among those studies of study abroad outcomes, Engle and Engle (2003) identified several major factors that influenced outcomes: duration of study abroad programs, amount of target language, extent of target language used abroad, context of academic work, type of housing, provisions for structured cultural interaction and experiential learning, and guided reflection on learning. Medlina- Lopez-Portillo (2004) suggested that there are three main factors: students' backgrounds, characteristics, and personal circumstances; choice of the experience made by the study abroad office, and choices made by students, such as independent travel and amount of contact with host communities. In a study of learning intercultural competence in nursing, Koskinen and Tossavainen (2004) explored situational components that affect the process of gaining intercultural competence. They found that pre-departure orientation, the amount of cross-cultural dialogue and social interaction, and mentors who assist students venturing into encounters with host communities are contributing factors to students' intercultural competence.

In a review of previous research on study abroad outcomes, Hoff (2008) mentioned that although there has been an increasing focus on factors that influence outcomes of study abroad, this area of research is still in its infancy. The literature shows that a great deal of studies have focused on issues such as personal development and intercultural sensitivity while intercultural competence has not yet been researched as an outcome of global learning. As more and more educational institutions are emphasizing students' development of intercultural competence, there is a need to study variables that influence intercultural competence as a specific outcome of study abroad.

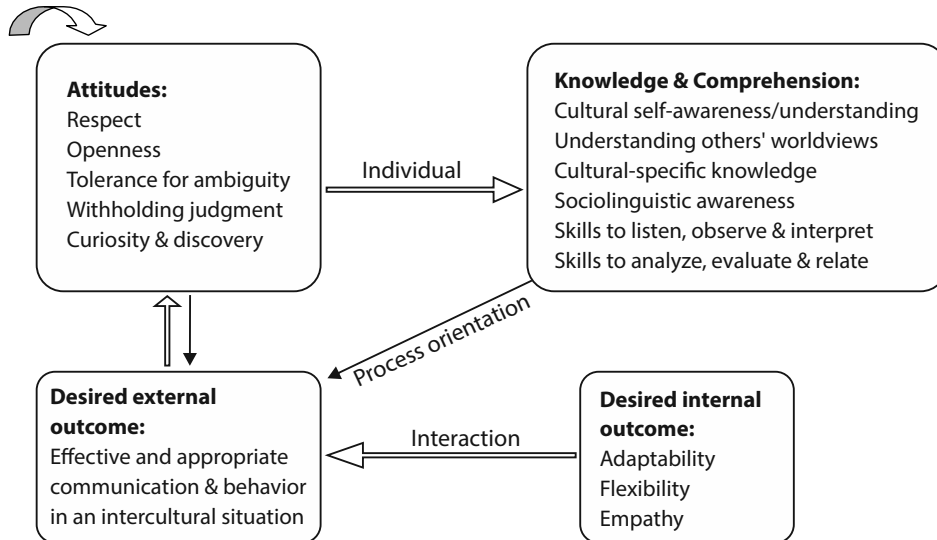
## Definition and components of intercultural competence

For decades, the term "intercultural competence" has been loosely defined by educators and has been adopted as a subjective evaluative notion. As a result, there was no consensus on its definition, and the term has been used interchangeably with other terms such as intercultural adaption or intercultural effectiveness (Deardorff, 2006; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Researchers in the 1970's began to develop models for conceptualizing intercultural competence. Many theoretical frameworks have been developed that proposed various definitions and elements of intercultural competence. While some models focus more on specific sub-areas such as language skills and intercultural sensitivity, others attempt to provide a comprehensive view and measurement of the competence (Fantini, 2009; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009).

In search of an agreement on what constitutes intercultural competence, Deardorff (2006, 2008, 2009) conducted a Delphi study that included internationally known experts as her participants. Deardorff's (2006) research discovered that among a list of proposed definitions, the top ranked one defines intercultural competence as "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural

situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (p. 247). Moreover, Deardorff's (2006, 2008, 2009) research revealed a list of 15 components that comprise intercultural competence. The 15 components were classified into four broader categories which are interrelated. Based on these research findings, the Deardorff Process Model of Intercultural Competence was developed, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1  
Deardorff Process Model of Intercultural Competence



Source: Deardorff, D. K. (2008).

The first category in the model is attitudes, which includes five elements: respect, openness, tolerance for ambiguity, withholding judgment, and curiosity. Deardorff (2008) stated that attitudes are initial points for developing intercultural competence. These attitudes will lead to development of a set of knowledge and skills, which falls into the second category in the model. Specific elements included in the second category are: cultural self-awareness/understanding; understanding others' worldviews; culture-specific knowledge; sociolinguistic awareness; skills to listen, observe and interpret; and, skills to analyze, evaluate, and relate. Next, the skills and knowledge in the second category, as well as the prerequisite attitudes, will lead to several internal outcomes, which are adaptability, flexibility, and empathy. Consequently, all the components from the three categories will demonstrate themselves in observable, external outcomes of effective and appropriate communication and behavior in an intercultural circumstance (Deardorff, 2008). Deardorff's (2006, 2008, 2009) model also stresses the continuing dynamic process of intercultural competence development. Any component in the model can directly influence other components in the model. For instance, an individual's attitudes might be altered after gaining more knowledge and skills and interacting with different cultures. Development of intercultural competence can be a never-ending journey on which one may never reach the summit.

## Purpose of the study

Although many studies (Paige, 1993; Engle & Engle, 2003; Medlina-Lopez-Portillo, 2004; Bennett, 2008; Hoff, 2008; Gillespie, Braskamp & Dwyer, 2009) have identified factors that affect learning outcomes of study abroad experiences, not much research has investigated impacts of education abroad specifically on students' development of their intercultural competence. Although various conceptual frameworks have been developed for intercultural competence, few of them were based on empirical research. Deardorff's model is the first one to define the concept and identified its key components based on a survey and a Delphi technique (Deardorff, 2006, 2008, 2009; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Therefore, this research adopted the Deardorff's Process Model of Intercultural Competence. In this study, the 15 components of intercultural competence in the model are considered as outcomes of participation in a global service-learning experience in Kenya.

The first purpose of this study is to identify key factors and contexts that contribute to components of intercultural competence. Because it was only the first time that the tourism department offered the global service-learning course, the study results will help the tourism department to examine the effectiveness the program design, which will be used to guide its future planning of similar international learning programs. The second purpose of this study is to contribute to the body of knowledge regarding critical variables that affect intercultural competence, which has been an under-researched topic. Lastly, this paper aims to stimulate further investigation and discussion of critical factors that contribute to the intercultural competence.

## Research methods

Previous research suggests that intercultural competence is an ongoing process and that it needs to be measured several times instead of at only one point in time (Deardorff, 2006, 2008, 2009). Hence, intercultural competence was measured at two different times in this study. Two self-evaluations of intercultural competence were developed based on the Deardorff Process Model of Intercultural Competence (Deardorff, 2006, 2008, 2009). The first intercultural competence evaluation was administered during the mid-point of the visit in Kenya. The students were given the second evaluation a few days before returning to the U.S. and submitted it one week after arriving home.

By measuring the competence at two different times, it would help the students to be more mindful about their experience during the entire program and to observe their own learning progress. Furthermore, this methodology also allows researchers to see how students' intercultural competence changed during the period. Because the first evaluation was used as a starting baseline, the results of the second evaluation can be used to discover the impacts of the global service-learning program on students' development of intercultural competence.

On the evaluations, students were asked to write down detailed reflections for each of the 15 components of intercultural competence that are included in Deardorff's (2006, 2008, 2009) model. Students were instructed to recall their experience in Kenya and to comment on how the experience influenced their development of intercultural competence. Those in-depth remarks provided by the students were used in this study to identify factors and contexts that contributed to each of the 15

components of intercultural competence in Deardorff's (2006, 2008, 2009) model. After students completed the two intercultural competence evaluations, their comments on the 15 components of competence were reviewed and analyzed. Several key factors and contexts that contribute to development of competence were identified based on these student reflections. Those factors and contexts are discussed in the section below.

## Results and discussion

After students completed the two intercultural competence evaluations, their comments on the 15 components of competence were reviewed and analyzed. Several key factors and contexts that contribute to development of competence were identified based on these student reflections. Those factors and contexts are discussed below.

### Contrast between the two cultures and languages

Students observed and experienced many differences between Kenya and the U.S. regarding way of life, culture, living conditions, language, etc. For instance, although many of our visits to local communities or tourist destinations were planned ahead, the specific schedule of many visits were not confirmed until the day before. This was a different experience for students who were used to the culture of scheduling things days or even months ahead of time in the U.S. One student comment stated that, "I have realized that I like being a little more in control over my day to day activities and surroundings. I don't mind not knowing about some things, but I also don't like feeling like I don't know what is coming up. I like to have a general idea of what to expect, so I can plan my time around it accordingly."

These American students needed to adjust themselves pertaining to how differently people of the two countries view time and scheduling. As one student mentioned, "The first thing that pops into my mind when hearing flexibility is 'Mzungu time!' It has been a running joke since we got to Kenya that the visitors stay to a time schedule far more than the locals, because Africans don't ever rush. We have had to practice flexibility and patience when we are trying to set a time to do anything and everything." When Kenyans say "Mzungu time", it refers to the way foreigners keep on schedule, which is usually more stringent than Kenyans do. In order to adjust themselves to a very different environment and culture, students were challenged to work on their intercultural competence.

Witnessing life with fewer resources in Kenya impacted on several components of intercultural competence, particularly empathy, cultural self-awareness/understanding, and respect. For example, one student remarked that, "I have realized that many Americans take so many things for granted. Education is one that really stood out to me. So many Kenyans value education, but many cannot afford it. Many Americans throw their education away, not caring whether or not they complete college or even high school. Even the technology the students in Kenya are offered is less advanced, yet they are producing some very smart students." Another comment stated that, "I would like to believe that I am very empathetic to the conditions of Kenyan families. An example would be how terrible I feel for the children who are unable to go to school. Many schools in Kenya require the students to wear uniforms. The uniforms cost approximately \$8.00. Many children in rural areas are unable to go to school because their parents cannot afford \$8.00 for the uniform. It makes me stop to think how selfish

we can be. I see \$8.00 as nothing, and the fact that, to me, the small amount is able to withhold a child from attending school makes me extremely sad." Those students' comments show that the challenges and hardships that students observed made them reflect on their own values and behavior, as well as developed more empathy and respect toward the local people.

Students encountered ambiguity constantly during the program due to the language barrier and unfamiliarity with Kenya's culture and way of life. One student wrote that, "I think I have been pretty tolerable for uncertainty in most instances. I think it is exciting not knowing everything about the Kenyan culture, experiences, etc., just because I can learn more in all of these instances." In this case, the student felt ambiguity, and in fact it helped her to explore more about the country.

Students found that besides the obvious language barrier, communication can be challenging due to very different cultural and societal environments. For instance, students found that they had to be creative when explaining what marshmallows are and taste like, which are something that most Kenyans had not seen.

## Intercultural competence of sojourners

The results of the intercultural competence evaluations verify Deardorff's (2006, 2008, 2009) proposition that each intercultural competence component can directly influence the rest of the components in her model. For instance, when a student commented on communication skills, the student also mentioned that it is a sign of respect to attempt to learn a local language.

Additionally, not only can attitudes be a fundamental starting point for developing intercultural competence, but any new knowledge and skill can also modify previous attitudes. As Deardorff (2006, 2008, 2009) suggested, the development of intercultural competence is a never-ending, cyclical process. Thus, prior to an experience abroad, students' pre-existing and newly updated levels of intercultural competence would influence their development. Students' competence can be constantly updated during their international experience, which is the case found in this study.

## Intercultural competence of local people

Our experience in Kenya taught us that the intercultural competence of local people whom we spent most of the time with was one of the critical factors that contributed to our students' development of the competence. During our visit, we worked with a graduate student from Moi University in Kenya. This student exhibited many intercultural competence components, such as respect; openness; curiosity and discovery; cultural self-awareness/understanding; understanding others' worldviews; culture-specific knowledge; sociolinguistic awareness; skills to listen, observe and interpret; skills to analyze, evaluate and relate; and effective communication and behavior.

During the program, the Kenyan graduate student participated in all activities with us. Thus, the American students spent a great deal of time with him. He was very mindful about any possible opportunity that could be a learning moment for the group. For instance, one day when walking together along a farm, he picked up several twigs and showed how local people use twigs to brush their teeth. The Kenyan graduate student seized many teaching and learning moments like this throughout the entire stay, which helped the American students tremendously in terms of learning about Kenyan culture.

This shows that when local people possess and demonstrate intercultural competence, it can further enrich the learning experience for the sojourners.

## Program design

Our service-learning project required students to visit a variety of places that have tourism potential and to interact with several community groups. Furthermore, the project required them to analyze the information they learned about local resources available for developing tourism. At the end of their stay in Kenya, the students provided recommendations for sustainable tourism development that would help local communities to improve their economies and quality of life. One student stated that, "Working on this class project has really allowed us to analyze the Kenyan tourism system, evaluate our findings in order to make recommendations, and relate this information to the real world and even how it should be implemented here locally. When comparing two different cultures and countries' habits, you have to analyze your own ways of life and be able to compare and contrast. This was really neat to see how two places that are so far apart can be yet so similar in many ways." As demonstrated in this student comment, the service-learning project helped students to work on their skills to analyze, evaluate, and relate, which is one component in Deardorff's model.

## Amount and quality of interaction with local people and length of program

Students spent several hours every day with Kenyan students and faculty of a local university on class discussions, field trips, and research activities. The amount of time provided opportunities for them to engage in meaningful conversations and strengthen the bonds among them. This was very beneficial for people to learn from each other's culture. In addition, the small size of the American group allowed each one to have more opportunities to mingle with Kenyans.

One student mentioned that she started reading local newspapers after her first week in Kenya. She also commented that the longer she stayed, the more interested she was in learning about what was happening in the region and how local people viewed the world. This implies that people may develop a relationship with a local community after staying for a certain amount of time. As a result, sojourners become interested in learning more about the local community and even take actions that can contribute to the community.

## Housing arrangement

The group stayed at a place in Kenya called The Lorna Kiplagat High Altitude Training Centre (HATC), which was established by Lorna Kiplagat, who currently holds the world records at the distances of 5,000 meters on the road, 10 miles, 20,000 meters on the road, and half marathon. HATC was developed in 1999 to academically and physically prepare Kenyan runners to compete for academic scholarships in the United States and Europe. HATC has 28 rooms that not only accommodate athletes but also welcome any type of visitors from all over the world. Therefore, the group interacted with many guests from several European countries as well as the staff members at HATC who are local Kenyans. Thus, the housing arrangement provided the students an environment to interact with people of different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, which would help in developing intercultural competence.



## Summary and conclusions

Due to the diverse nature of the working environment in the global tourism industry, it is essential for tourism faculty to provide learning activities that help students become interculturally competent. In order to design an effective learning experience that promotes intercultural competence, it is crucial for tourism educators to first understand key factors that contribute to students' development of this competence.

Given that little research has been done regarding factors that affect students' development of intercultural competence, this study attempts to explore the topic in a global service-learning setting. Deardorff's Process Model of Intercultural Competence provides a useful theoretical framework for assessing students' development of intercultural competence. Tourism students in the service-learning course were asked to provide detailed reflections on how the experience in Kenya helped them improve the 15 components of intercultural competence throughout their three-week stay in the country. The reflection data were used for identifying several key factors and contexts that contribute to development of competence. Some of those factors supported several previous studies (Paige, 1993; Engle & Engle, 2003; Medlina-Lopez-Portillo, 2004; Bennett, 2008; Hoff, 2008; Gillespie, Braskamp & Dwyer, 2009).

For instance, Medlina-Lopez-Portillo (2004) studied the effect of program duration on development of intercultural sensitivity. The researcher compared students who participated in a study abroad program for seven weeks in Mexico with those who spent sixteen weeks in Mexico as well. The study found that program duration had effect on students' intercultural sensitivity. In this study of American students' experience in Kenya, it is found that length of program was essential for certain components of Deardorff's model. As presented above, one student started reading local newspapers after her first week in the country which helped to develop several intercultural competence components, such as understanding others' worldviews and cultural-specific knowledge. What this student did may not have happened if the service-learning course lasted for less than one week.

Intuitively, one might assume that the longer a study abroad program lasts, the more intercultural competence development can occur. However, this correlation has not received much empirical examination by previous research. Furthermore, there might be compounding effects of duration of program with other factors, such as program structure and students' personal characteristics and background (Medlina-Lopez-Portillo, 2004). Thus, the effect of length of program as a sole factor and its compounding effect with other variables require further investigation. This area of research will provide insights for the design of international learning programs.

This study found that contrast between the two cultures and languages seems to be an essential factor that promoted the participants' development of intercultural competence. As Deardorff (2008) suggested, without actually experiencing a different culture, cultural self-awareness can be difficult to achieve. Oftentimes, experiences of other cultures prompt an individual to reflect on his or her own culture. In this study, one American student commented on an evaluation that, "I am definitely more aware of how much our culture takes things for granted. I was hand-washing my own clothes today, and the task wore me out. I dread doing laundry at home, but now I realize how easy of a task it actually is. I definitely have a new respect for Kenyans who hand wash all of their clothes year round. I also hope to never take my washer and dryer for granted again." This statement shows that learning

the contrasts between the two countries prompted students' cultural self-awareness. This observation begs one question: "If the same group of American students visited a country that shares more cultural similarities instead, would the amount of intercultural competence development be the same?" To the knowledge of the author of this paper, the effect of contrast between home and host countries on sojourners' intercultural competence development has not been empirically tested.

Results of the intercultural competence evaluations in this study indicate that there are several interrelations among the 15 components of intercultural competence in Deardorff's (2006, 2008, 2009) model. Since the model was developed, there has not been empirical research that provides in-depth testing and discussion regarding how these components are interconnected. The dynamics among the 15 components of intercultural competence also require further exploration. It would be interesting to further investigate if the same connections can also be found in different global learning settings. In addition, future research needs to look at conditions that cultivate those connections and feedback loops in Deardorff's model.

Finally, this study found that intercultural competence of local people was instrumental for developing intercultural skills and knowledge for students who participated in the global service-learning course in Kenya. However, there is a lack of research in the literature regarding how intercultural competence of local people contributes to sojourners' development of competence and the degree of its influence. Future research is needed to explore the level of its effect on sojourners' development in various contexts and the integrated effect of this aspect with other factors, such as structure and duration of program.

Although this study makes several important contributions toward specific factors and contexts that affect development of intercultural competence, there are limitations. The data of this research were gathered from one global service learning program. There were only three students who participated in the program. Although the data provided abundant insight for understanding student perceptions of intercultural competence, factors that contribute to acquisition of the competence, and the dynamic process of developing intercultural competence, the small sample size may confine potential research findings of this research. In addition, the model was adopted in a unique service learning program in Kenya; the results of this study may be different from those of other types of experiences that are developed for fostering intercultural competence.

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