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THE DYNAMICS OF CROSS-CULTURAL LEARNING: A U-SHAPED JOURNEY?

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ABSTRACT

This empirical paper focuses on the dynamics of cross-cultural learning by examining the shape and changes in the cross-cultural learning curve. Specifically, analyzing the results from a study performed on a total of 322 undergraduate students, the paper aims to describe the process of developing cross-cultural competencies, and cultural intelligence in particular. This study seeks to provide answers about the context of developing cultural intelligence, especially in relation to the starting point regarding cultural intelligence, previous cross-cultural experience, and overall enthusiasm for learning.

The most intriguing finding of this paper is the fact that cross-cultural learning indeed represents a U-shaped journey. This insight helps to develop better cross-cultural training programs, that can be specifically tailored to key characteristics of the learner, and thus enabling better results in developing cultural intelligence. HR experts focused on training and development can benefit from understanding that culture shock doesn't only happen with international travel, but also with cross-cultural learning. Preparing participants of the cross-cultural training programs for the foreseeable frustration and shock as they go through training, might just be the nudge they need to finish moving along the curve towards new heights.

Additionally, the study confirmed that the cultural intelligence growth pace is correlated with the baseline reported cultural intelligence of the learner, and the learner's enthusiasm for the training project.

Keywords: *cross-cultural learning, learning curve, cultural intelligence, cross-cultural training, cross-cultural competencies*

1. INTRODUCTION

Understanding the similarities and differences among different cultures worldwide is imperative for all companies striving for global success. International companies significantly focus on developing their employees' global talents, particularly cultural intelligence (CQ). Likewise, cultural intelligence is gaining much focus in research (e.g., Chen et al., 2024; Lee and Hwang, 2024; Piršl, Drandić and Matošević, 2022; Setti, Sommovigo and Piergiorgio, 2022; Vlajčić and Liović, 2023), particularly the motivational component, the so-called motivational cultural intelligence (e.g., Song, Varma and Yingying, 2023; Yang, 2023). Cultural intelligence can be described as the ability to adapt to different cultures and their particular communication style, as well as the competency to build effective relationships (Skoko, 2022). Cultural intelligence relies on understanding the differences between the two cultures, which inevitably relies on being not only familiar with both cultures, but also understanding them thoroughly. Additionally, high cultural intelligence enables a deep understanding of the cultural differences' nuances, and the ability to adjust to new circumstances. By adjusting our behavior, we can ensure smooth communication without misunderstandings. Similarly, by adjusting our expectations, we can ensure an understanding of the communication styles, behaviors, and values of individuals from other cultures.

Cultural intelligence is just one of the cross-cultural competencies in the toolkit of global talents who travel internationally or are assigned to expatriate roles. The other cross-cultural competencies include cross-cultural communication, adaptability, empathy, awareness of cultural differences, and the ability to collaborate in multicultural environments. James (2018) notes that cross-cultural communication allows expats to recognize and understand contextual differences while communicating with other individuals, and particularly with individuals from "high-context societies". Meaning, societies that rely more on the context than explicitly spoken words or sentences. It seems that cultural intelligence plays a major role in successful cross-cultural communication, as it provides a useful starting point through understanding the similarities as well as differences. And although high cultural intelligence shines particularly in interactions with individuals from high-context societies, it remains crucial for any cross-cultural communication.

Furthermore, Tsai and colleagues (2019) found that most successful expatriates in managerial positions continuously adjust their leadership styles. Adaptability is also one of the previously mentioned cross-cultural competencies. Tsai and colleagues (2019) moreover emphasize that, in addition to adaptation, successful expatriates also strive to inspire change among local employees. They highlight that successfully leading employees from different

cultural backgrounds requires an understanding of local work habits and behaviors, not just adapting to local social norms. In other words, it is once again shown that one of the characteristics of successful expatriates is a high degree of cultural intelligence, which is reflected in the adequate recognition of cultural differences and consequently the ability to adapt to circumstances.

Overall, cultural intelligence is a concept clearly recognized as an antecedent to success in global management and largely depends on acquiring knowledge and experience about different societal cultures (Lenartowicz, Johnson, and Konopaske, 2014). Therefore, a crucial question arises: can cultural intelligence be developed? Numerous corporate experiences and case studies indicate that it can. Although there are frequent opinions that the development of cultural intelligence and cross-cultural competencies, in general, should start from early childhood (e.g., Hercigonja, 2017), exposure to international cultures is most often first recorded during higher education (Vlajčić and Liović, 2023, p. 46). Regardless of individuals' prior experiences, nowadays, developing employees' cultural intelligence, or cross-cultural learning, is one of the key tasks of the Training and Development departments.

Initially, the development of global talents was most often conducted by providing direct experiences of learning about other cultures. For instance, Yamazaki and Kayes (2004) observed that expatriates often learn how to effectively manage employees from different cultures without having undergone formal training or education in cross-cultural skills. In the meantime, we have learned that the skills needed by expatriates are most effectively developed through cross-cultural education programs (e.g., Lenartowicz, Johnson and Konopaske, 2014; Okpara and Kabongo, 2011). The most commonly used methods include briefings on the local area, lectures, books, videos, interactive language learning, role-playing, local area visits, and simulations (Lenartowicz, Johnson and Konopaske, 2014). The three most commonly used cross-cultural training methods for understanding high-context cultures are interaction, didactic training, and awareness of cultural differences (Lawson and Shepherd, 2019). Specifically, using empirical research, Lawson and Shepherd (2019) identified five specific elements to consider when designing cross-cultural training: anticipatory adjustment, cultural distance, cultural match, ways and methods of adapting to a particular culture, and awareness of cultural differences and diversity.

Over time, the importance and presence of virtual cross-cultural teams in global business have significantly increased (Mochaitis, Zander and De Cieri, 2018; SHRM Foundation, 2016). Therefore, it seems extremely important not only to encourage regular cross-cultural training within companies but also to continuously enhance and improve the content of such training. Only through prioritizing cross-cultural learning can global talents truly achieve the best results in a multicultural environment.

To continuously enhance cross-cultural training, it is important to better understand the process of cross-cultural learning. Therefore, this paper focuses on the learning curve in cross-cultural training from the individual's perspective. Specifically, using the results of an empirical study conducted with 322 undergraduate students, the aim of this paper is to gain a deeper understanding of the process of acquiring cross-cultural competencies, specifically cultural intelligence. The research seeks to provide an answer regarding the context of developing cultural intelligence, particularly concerning previous experience in a multicultural environment, the initial level of cultural intelligence, and the general level of enthusiasm for developing cultural intelligence through the experience of cross-cultural learning.

2. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF CROSS-CULTURAL LEARNING

It is known that the cultural adaptation process model, described by Lysgaard in 1955, depicts the experience of adapting to a different societal culture with a so-called U-curve. Lysgaard (1955), studying a group of Norwegian students who came to study in the United States, identified a distinct pattern that repeated in the students' experiences. In terms of cultural adaptation, the U-curve suggests that the experience starts with an initial state of euphoria and enthusiasm for the adventure, which then gradually turns into a period of frustration and depression due to difficulties in the new environment, and finally ends with adaptation to the new culture and an enhanced sense of satisfaction.

Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) attempted to build upon the aforementioned model and proposed an adaptation model whose curve resembles the letter "W". Their intention was to emphasize the fact that individuals experience a similar decline in enthusiasm twice – once when they arrive in a new culture, and once when they return to their home country (and culture). In the literature, this decline in enthusiasm is referred to as culture shock, and the subsequent decline in enthusiasm upon returning home is called reverse culture shock.

Further research has more thoroughly described the typical experience of adapting to a new culture, such as when relocating to another country. Black and Mendenhall (1991) described four stages in the process of cross-cultural adaptation. In the first, introductory phase, adaptation is relatively easy and quite pleasant, which is why this phase is called the "honeymoon." Soon, often within the first week of being abroad, a person increasingly experiences discomfort, entering periods of crisis, and this phase is called "culture shock." This phase is typically followed by the "adjustment" phase, in which the individual gradually becomes acquainted with the new culture and lifestyle in the new environment. The final phase is again described as a happy period, where the individual successfully overcomes the challenges of the new culture ("mastery") and fully integrates functionally into it.

The insights that the model of adapting to a new culture follows a U-shaped curve might be used to enhance the effectiveness of cross-cultural training (e.g., Lawson and Shepherd, 2019). Therefore, one of the objectives of this research is to test whether cross-cultural learning also follows a U-shaped curve. If this is accurate, adequately preparing training participants for the potential frustration and shock they might experience during the training could lead to faster and more successful cross-cultural learning, or the development of cultural intelligence. Thus, the first hypothesis is as follows:

Hypothesis 1: The dynamics of cross-cultural learning follows a U-shaped curve.

So far, the topic of antecedents to successful cross-cultural learning has been extensively addressed in the literature. The most comprehensive list includes as many as eighty different antecedents of cultural competencies, grouped into six themes: vision, contact, context, collaboration, connections, and outcome (Harper, 2008).

Additionally, the experiences of individuals who spent a significant part of their childhood in cultures different from those their parents might identify with (known as "adult third culture kids," ATCKs) highlight four key predictors of developing cross-cultural competencies (Tarique and Weisbord, 2013): diversity of early international experiences (measured by the number of countries one has lived in), linguistic diversity (measured by the number of foreign languages one speaks), diversity within the family (measured by the number of different ethnic groups in one's family background), and a personality trait considered one of the "Big Five" personality traits: openness to experience. It is also interesting to note that openness to new experiences is a key predictor of expatriate success (e.g., Tarique and Schuler, 2008).

Additionally, much is known about the different dimensions of cultural intelligence and their impact on cross-cultural learning. For example, one study found that motivational cultural intelligence significantly reduces stress levels resulting from adapting to a new culture during short-term travel, while perceived ability to speak a foreign language and the age of the participants significantly increased stress levels (Crowne and Engle, 2016).

Unfortunately, we still do not know enough about the antecedents that might lead to a steeper learning curve in cross-cultural learning, and thus a greater leap in the development of cultural intelligence. Accordingly, the objectives of this research are focused on initial cultural intelligence, prior cross-cultural experience, and differences in enthusiasm for the cross-cultural learning experience. Based on these objectives, the following hypotheses have been defined:

Hypothesis 2a: The growth rate of cultural intelligence correlates with the initial cultural intelligence.

Hypothesis 2b: The growth rate of cultural intelligence correlates with the previous cross-cultural experience.

Hypothesis 2c: The growth rate of cultural intelligence is correlated with the enthusiasm for cross-cultural learning experiences.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research included students enrolled in the course Organizational Behavior, which is conducted in the second year of undergraduate studies. As part of this course, students participated in a project designed to provide them with direct experience in cross-cultural collaboration. The project accounted for 30% of the total grade, lasted eight weeks, and was organized in such a way that students were randomly divided into teams of students who attended the same course at three different universities on two different continents. The teams consisted of 3 or 4 students, with at least one student from each of the three universities present in each team.

A total of 322 students participated in the research, divided into 93 teams. Of these, 77 students were studying at a public university in the United States, 104 students were studying at a private university in the United States, and 141 students were studying at a private higher education institution in Croatia.

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected at three different time points in the research. Time point 1 refers to the period before the start of the project, time point 2 refers to the period in the middle of the project, and time point 3 refers to the period after the completion of the project. The primary variables for which quantitative data were collected are:

(1) Cultural intelligence, measured using the Confidence sub-scale of Chen and Starosta's (2000) Intercultural Sensitivity scale, with an alpha coefficient of 0.81 for time point 1 (before the project), 0.81 for time point 2 (mid-project), and 0.76 for time point 3 (after the project);

(2) Enthusiasm for cross-cultural learning experiences, measured through a direct question at all three previously described time points; and

(3) Prior cross-cultural experience, measured through a direct question before the start of the project.

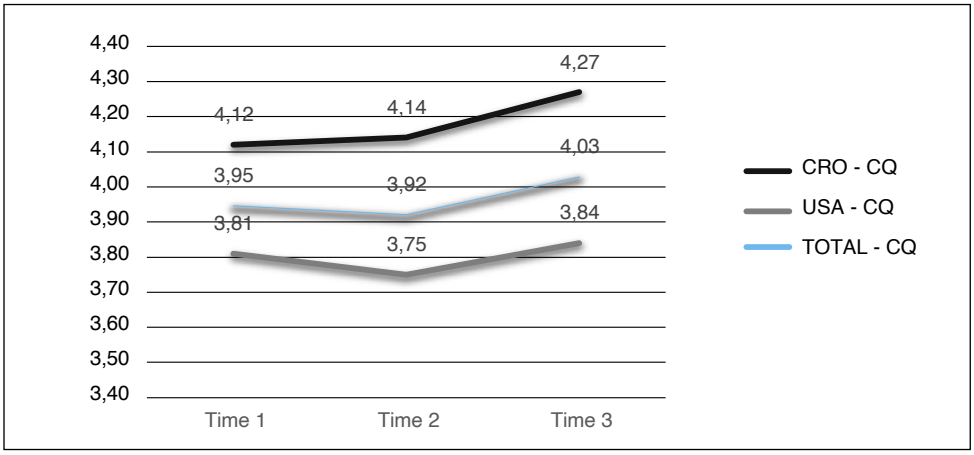
All quantitative variables were measured using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 to 5. Qualitative data were also collected at each of the three-time points, which were very useful for a clearer interpretation of the obtained findings.

The research was conducted using a highly structured questionnaire created with the Qualtrics Survey software. The data were processed using the IBM SPSS Statistics 27 software package.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

A preliminary review of the average cultural intelligence indicates that students from Croatia reported higher initial cultural intelligence (measured at time point 1) compared to students from the USA (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Cross-Cultural Learning Curve – Cultural Intelligence Over Time



This finding could be related to the fact that Croatian students also reported a higher level of prior cross-cultural experience (the average value for Croatian students was 3,81, while the average for American students was 3,08). Consequently, it is to be expected that Croatian students were simply more cross-culturally aware, which was also reflected in their assessment of their own cultural intelligence. What is particularly interesting is the movement of the cross-cultural learning curve, which in this study was observed through changes in the level of cultural intelligence at different time points (before, during, and after the project), as shown in the previous figure. The cross-cultural learning curve in this research among American students shows a decline at time point 2, during the project. Additionally, it appears that the learning curve of Croatian students rises more steeply at time point 3, after the project ends, compared to the learning curve of American students who started the study with a lower initial point.

Although Figure 1 suggests that the cross-cultural learning curve may resemble the shape of the letter "U," to further validate these preliminary results based on descriptive statistics, additional statistical analysis is necessary. Specifically, combining data from all study participants, a paired-samples t-test was conducted to test differences between means at three different time points. Descriptive data are presented in Table 1.

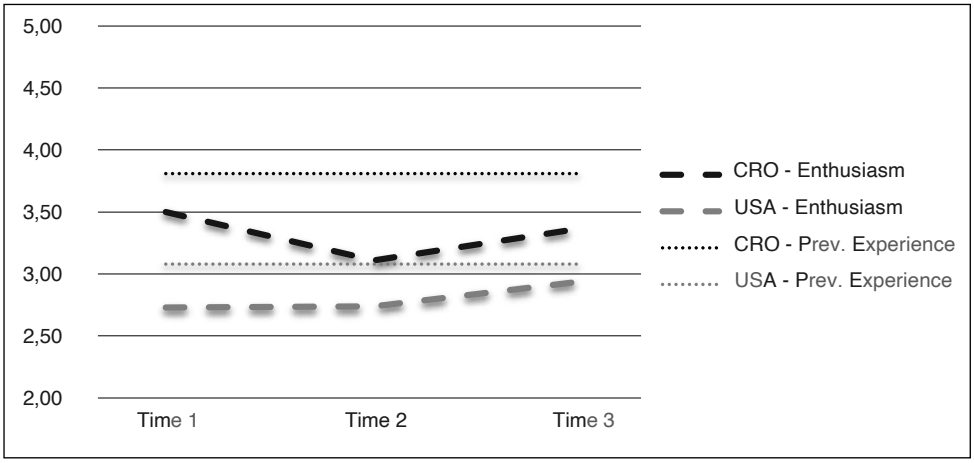
Table 1: Results of Paired-Samples T-Test Examining Differences in Cultural Intelligence at Three Different Time Points

Cultural Intelligence (CQ)		t	Sig.
Pair 1	Time 1 – Time 2	-2,394	**0,018**
Pair 2	Time 2 – Time 3	-2,026	**0,044**
Pair 3	Time 1 – Time 3	-3,302	**0,001**

Based on the data from the conducted t-test (Table 1), it is clear th at cultural intelligence indeed significantly differs across the different time points. Therefore, we can conclude that the first hypothesis of the study is accepted, indicating that the cross-cultural learning curve over time does indeed take the shape of the letter "U".

Further, using data from the conducted research, additional analysis was performed on initial levels of cultural intelligence, previous cross-cultural experience, and changes in enthusiasm for cross-cultural learning experiences. Interestingly, it appears that the enthusiasm curve also follows the shape of the letter "U" (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Enthusiasm for cross-cultural learning experience, and previous cross-cultural experience



Based on the data obtained from the research, a new variable was calculated and named "cultural growth." This variable represents the difference between measured cultural intelligence at time point 3 (after the project) and at time point 1 (before the project). Table 2 shows the results of the statistical analysis conducted to determine the strength of the statistical relationship using Pearson's correlation coefficient.

Table 2: Correlation test between Cultural Growth and other variables from the study

		PCCE	ENT1	ENT2	ENT3	CQ1	CQ2	CQ3	CGrowth
Previous cross-cultural experience (PCCE)	Pearson's coefficient	1	,231**	,227**	,165*	,503**	,431**	,260**	-,127
	Significance (two-tailed)		,000	,002	,030	,000	,000	,001	,097
	N	618	618	182	173	618	182	172	172
Enthusiasm at Time 1 (ENT1)	Pearson's coefficient	,231**	1	,626**	,390**	,319**	,392**	,262**	,017
	Significance (two-tailed)	,000		,000	,000	,000	,000	,001	,822
	N	618	620	182	173	620	182	172	172
Enthusiasm at Time 2 (ENT2)	Pearson's coefficient	,227**	,626**	1	,448**	,180*	,357**	,227**	,128
	Significance (two-tailed)	,002	,000		,000	,015	,000	,001	,116
	N	182	182	265	199	182	265	198	151
Enthusiasm at Time 3 (ENT3)	Pearson's coefficient	,165*	,390**	,448**	1	,203**	,236**	,360**	,257**
	Significance (two-tailed)	,030	,000	,000		,007	,001	,000	,001
	N	173	173	199	229	173	199	228	172
Cultural Intelligence at Time 1 (CQ1)	Pearson's coefficient	,503**	,319**	,180*	,203**	1	,656**	,470**	-,380**
	Significance (two-tailed)	,000	,000	,015	,007		,000	,000	,000
	N	618	620	182	173	620	182	172	172
Cultural Intelligence at Time 2 (CQ2)	Pearson's coefficient	,431**	,392**	,357**	,236**	,656**	1	,521**	,041
	Significance (two-tailed)	,000	,000	,000	,001	,000		,000	,619
	N	182	182	265	199	182	265	198	151
Cultural Intelligence at Time 3 (CQ3)	Pearson's coefficient	,260**	,262**	,227**	,360**	,470**	,521**	1	,638**
	Significance (two-tailed)	,001	,001	,001	,000	,000	,000		,000
	N	172	172	198	228	172	198	228	172
Cultural Growth (CGrowth)	Pearson's coefficient	-,127	,017	,128	,257**	-,380**	,041	,638**	1
	Significance (two-tailed)	,097	,822	,116	**,001**	**,000**	,619	**,000**	
	N	172	172	151	172	172	151	172	172

*** The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).*

** The correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).*

The correlation matrix from Table 2 clearly shows a statistically significant correlation between the variable cultural growth and enthusiasm at time point 3, as well as cultural intelligence at time points 1 and 3. Such findings confirm hypothesis 2a (The rate of cultural intelligence growth correlates with initial cultural intelligence) and hypothesis 2c (The rate of cultural intelligence growth correlates with enthusiasm for cross-cultural learning experience).

It is interesting that the variable cultural growth was not statistically significantly correlated with previous cross-cultural experience, which means that it is not possible to accept hypothesis 2b (The rate of cultural intelligence growth is correlated with previous cross-cultural experience).

5. CONCLUSION

The most interesting discovery of this study is the fact that cross-cultural learning follows a U-shaped curve, known as the U-curve. Considering this, international businesses now have a dual task: (1) to prepare employees who are preparing to embark on an international assignment for culture shock due to relocation, living, and working in a new culture, and (2) to prepare them for culture shock related to learning about the specifics of the new culture!

We are aware of the devastating effects individuals may experience when they find themselves at the bottom of the U-curve while immersed in a new culture. It can be assumed that a similar, albeit potentially milder, effect could be expected among individuals who find themselves at the bottom of the U-curve while immersed in a cross-cultural training program. Therefore, it would be useful to understand the intensity of this potential side effect of cross-cultural training and the best ways to mitigate its potentially negative impact.

Furthermore, the research has indicated that the level of enthusiasm with which an individual embarks on a cross-cultural training program matters significantly. This finding further underscores the importance of preparation for potential learning barriers, such as encountering culture shock during learning, and consequently experiencing a temporary decline in confidence in one's own cross-cultural skills. It would certainly be interesting to further investigate what exactly contributes to enthusiasm for developing cross-cultural skills and cross-cultural learning, as well as the causal relationship between these concepts.

Overall, the findings of the described study are highly significant for Human Resources professionals who prepare employees for international assignments. With these insights, training programs can be designed more effectively to have a stronger impact on the development of cultural intelligence in global talents by tailoring them to the specific characteristics of participants. Additionally, these findings can aid participants in cross-cultural training, as they prepare for their careers as future global leaders, expatriates, and global talents.

Quality preparation for the type of culture shock participants might experience during cross-cultural training, which is inherently similar to culture shock when relocating to another culture, can greatly reduce the shock level and help them move through the bottom of the U-curve more swiftly. For instance, Xia (2020) discusses the need to prepare Chinese students going abroad for the culture shock they will encounter. With adequate preparation, students can avoid unpleasant experiences of inadequacy or adjustment failure. Instead, with appropriate tactics and suggestions on how to experience and understand the impact of culture shock more easily, students can be prepared in advance to anticipate and reflect on their experiences, rather than dealing with the consequences of culture shock only after it occurs.

Similarly, it would be beneficial to prepare participants in cross-cultural training in advance for the culture shock related to learning. This preparation can help them avoid feelings of inadequacy or failure in adaptation when they start the cross-cultural journey and begin to explore all cross-cultural topics they were unaware of, yet didn't realize they didn't know.

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SLIJEDI LI MEĐUKULTURNO UČENJE U-KRIVULJU?

SAŽETAK RADA

Ovaj empirijski rad se fokusira na oblik i kretanje krivulje međukulturnog učenja. Analizom podataka prikupljenih istraživanjem koje je provedeno na 322 studenta prijediplomskih studija, ovaj rad nastoji pobliže opisati proces stjecanja međukulturnih kompetencija, specifično kulturne inteligencije. Rad opisuje kontekst razvoja kulturne inteligencije pojedinca, s fokusom na prethodno iskustvo u višekulturnom okruženju, prvobitan stupanj kulturne inteligencije te općeniti stupanj entuzijazma za razvoj kulturne inteligencije kroz iskustvo međukulturnog učenja.

Najvažniji doprinos ovog rada je spoznaja da međukulturno učenje slijedi krivulju u obliku slova „U", tzv. U-krivulju. Razumijevanje krivulje učenja omogućuje dizajn kvalitetnijih programa treninga, prilagođen specifičnim ključnim obilježjima polaznika, a koji mogu imati jači utjecaj na razvoj kulturne inteligencije globalnih talenata. Spoznaja da se svojevrsni kulturni šok može doživjeti već za vrijeme međukulturnog treninga, vrlo sličan kulturnom šoku pri preseljenju u drugu kulturu, vrijedna je za stručnjake za ljudske potencijale koji se bave obrazovanjem i razvojem. Kvalitetna priprema polaznika može uvelike smanjiti razinu šoka i omogućiti brže i uspješnije međukulturno učenje, odnosno razvoj kulturne inteligencije.

Također, rezultati istraživanja su potvrdili da je stopa rasta kulturne inteligencije u korelaciji s početnom kulturnom inteligencijom te također u korelaciji s entuzijazmom za iskustvo međukulturnog učenja.

Ključne riječi: *međukulturno učenje, krivulja učenja, kulturna inteligencija, međukulturni trening, međukulturne kompetencije*