

Using the Intercultural Sensitizer to Assist  
International Educators and Administrators

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## 要 約

### インターカルチュラルセンシタイザーを使って文化を教える

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文化とは何か、また文化的感受性について教えるための教材は、いくつも存在する。その中で教師は、そのときの教育対象により、最も有効な教材を選択しなければならない。多くの教師が用いる教材のひとつに、インターカルチュラルセンシタイザーがある。

インターカルチュラルセンシタイザーが、文化理解を深めるためにいかに効果的であるかについては、これまで多くの研究者が研究を重ねてきた。その効果についての調査結果は、それがかなり有効であるという見解で一致している。それでは、なぜ有効であるのか。その答えは、ひとの認知領域に強く働きかけるといふ、インターカルチュラルセンシタイザーの特性にあると言えるかもしれない。

インターカルチュラルセンシタイザーは、「不確かさ」の度合いと「不安感」の度合いがひとに与える影響には、ある関係性があるのだという考え方に基づいている。ひとは、「外部者」に出会ったとき、そのことから生じる不安感による悪影響を軽減するため、不確かな要素を減らそうと試みる。すなわち、それらの外部者たちの行動になんらかの意味を持たせることにより、不確かさを減少させようとするのである。しかし、異文化に触れた経験が少ない場合、外部者の行動に対して、安易に誤った意味づけをしてしまうことが多い。言いかえれば、ひとに誤った属性を与えてしまうということである。インターカルチュラルセンシタイザーは、このような属性に関する誤った認識を起しにくくすることを目的としている。

属性の認識は認知領域でおこなわれているため、インターカルチュラルセンシタイザーも認知領域に働きかける。自文化の判断基準のみによって軽率な属性判断をしないよう、訓練するための教材である。学習者が未知の行動・行為に出会ったとき、自らの認知的スキルをもって選択した意味付けをおこなえるようにするということである。目的は、正しい答えが何かということを知ることではなく、学習者が自信を持って、確かな目で、未知のものとの出逢いに向き合うことができるようになるということなのである。

*Answers that sound good aren't necessarily good sound answers.*

*—Proverb from Chinese Fortune Cookie*

In teaching culture and cultivating cultural sensitivity, there are a number of options for an intercultural trainer to choose from. However, depending on the group of learners, one must choose the one that is most appropriate. One leading category of learning activity is the cultural assimilator. Its proper use can greatly facilitate the appreciation of cultural diversity. Thus, it can be seen as a valuable tool in decreasing cultural ignorance and increasing the likelihood of competent intercultural interaction. To support this idea, this paper will look at the sensitizer's possible use with a particular group. The purpose of this is to illustrate how the intercultural sensitizer might work in a real situation. Then, after the presentation of this group, several key factors that allow the cultural assimilator to have merit (introduced later) will be examined.

### **Using the cultural assimilator with a specific group**

As universities struggle to reflect and cope with the increase in globalization, many are accommodating large numbers of international students. While international students certainly enrich any campus, most universities would probably acknowledge that the diversity of cultures on campuses brings with it certain difficulties. The housing of international students is one such example. In probably most campus settings, students, both international and domestic, choose to live in campus housing because of either university policy or the low rent and convenience of living on campus. As a result, campuses must deal with housing situations where the tenants are highly diverse. In most cases, this responsibility falls on the university housing superintendent and residence assistants. The nature of university housing, the proximity and inevitable interaction between international and domestic students, can make this a large and intense responsibility. Due to this fact, it would seem to be in the best interests of these university administrators to provide cultural sensitivity training for those who will have to deal with these situations.

Japanese universities are no exception. With campuses being home to large Chinese student populations along with countless other international student groups, knowing how to handle manifestations of cultural crises would seem to be highly valuable. Thus, let us take a look at how intercultural sensitizers, and, more specifically, culture-general assimilators could benefit those who are in positions of administering these students. For the sake of the example, I will present a hypothetical group of twenty university residence assistants and housing superintendents. Since they are fictitious, let us say that they have had little prior intercultural experience, especially in circumstances where they have power. Let us also say that they are relatively young, eager to do a good job, have different learning styles, and know about the potential for crises in having international and domestic students interacting. Having said that, let's take a look at how the culture-general assimilator might further intercultural sensitivity and thereby give housing administrators and assistants a foundation for adequately handling

intercultural difficulties. In doing this, what is affected by the activity, the learning style that is most receptive to it, how it affects one's ethnocentrism, the pertinent risks involved, and the advantages and disadvantages of its use will be explained. These are the factors that must be scrutinized in order to understand the usefulness of this activity in creating intercultural competence.

### **What is affected by the use of culture-general assimilators?**

According to Landis and Cushner (Landis and Bhagat, 1996, p. 185), the intercultural sensitizer, the cross-cultural training category that the culture-general assimilator is part, has been heavily examined in terms of whether it is an effective tool in sensitizing people to culture. Landis and Cushner go on to say that the studies of its effects have resulted in consistently showing it to be quite useful (p. 185). The question, then, is why is it so effective. The answer may lie in its ability to affect several learning domains in the learner, but also in the one domain that is affected the most, the cognitive realm.

The intercultural sensitizer, and thus, the culture-general assimilator, was created on the assumption that much of cultural insensitivity is due to the lack of understanding of other cultures. More specifically, it is based on the notion that there is a correlation in human social interaction between the level of uncertainty and the level of anxiety. Gudykunst and Kim (1997, chap. 7) state that the more uncertain we are, the more anxiety we have. So in order to decrease the ill effects of anxiety, we try to lessen uncertainty when encountering someone from an 'outgroup' (i.e. someone outside the group we identify with). We do this by trying to "figure the person out." That is, we give meaning to their actions so that we can reduce our uncertainty. However, without exposure to cultural difference, it is easy to give incorrect meaning to outgroup behavior. If there has been no prior intercultural exposure, there is the tendency to assign meaning based solely on our cultural background. In other words, we make an error in attribution. According to Albert (Fowler and Mumford, 1995, p. 158), the purpose of the intercultural sensitizer is to decrease the likelihood of making an error in attribution.

Since attributions are made on a cognitive level, intercultural sensitizers also work in the cognitive realm. Their purpose is to train your mind not to make hasty attributions based solely on your cultural background. This is accomplished through presenting the learner with a cross-cultural situation and then asking the learner a question. As Pedersen (1988) explains:

The culture assimilator is a technique presenting a paragraph-length situation requiring a decision and several responses, one being more culturally appropriate than the others. The participant is trained to identify the best of several alternative responses to the situation. Examples are situation or context specific, and participants have to select from alternative explanations. Thus, participants learn to "assimilate" into the unfamiliar culture by learning to anticipate both the alternative responses and the characteristics of a favored response. (p. 21)

By taking part in this activity, the learner is forced to make a choice using one's cognitive skills to assign meaning to foreign behavior. However, when deciding on the appropriate response,

the learner should heed the advice of the aforementioned fortune cookie proverb. Some “answers” may appear suitable in the learner’s own cultural environment, yet may not be “sound” due to the cultural context of the assimilator situation.

Nevertheless, the object is not necessarily to find the right answer, but more importantly, to get learners to become aware and more comfortable in dealing with foreign interaction. For university housing personnel, it would mean consciously thinking about what may explain the behavior of international housing residents. In turn, this can lead to better management of intercultural situations in student housing. Still, some would argue that culture-general assimilators are not just cognitive.

In their respective articles, Brislin, Cushner and Landis all maintain, that these sensitizers also work in the behavioral and affective domains since the activity itself can be seen as a mirror of what actually occurs in reality. In the activity, as in reality, we are faced with a foreign situation and must make a choice from information that we have. Given that information and situation, we actively choose how to respond, either through our actions (behavior) or through our emotions (affective). Since an appropriate response is dependent on competent cognitive attributions, the affective and behavioral domains may be seen as being affected secondarily. Nevertheless, it seems appropriate to point out these domains’ presence.

### **What learning style is best addressed using this activity?**

As with learning domains, the culture-general assimilator cannot be categorized as affecting only one area. Because the assimilator usually involves detailing various intercultural situations, its use, either directly or indirectly, affects all four of Kolb’s (1985) learning styles. In short, when properly administered, it can address, at least to a minimal degree, the learners’ needs for concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.

For the concrete experience (CE) learner, the culture-general assimilator is probably seen as very useful. It gives a defined example of a real situation and allows the learner to learn from the “experience” of the activity. The assimilator gives the learner a hypothetical, yet potentially real situation where he or she must use their cognitive skills to choose how to handle the situation. For many, as Kolb maintains, this means relying on one’s “concrete experience” and the “ability to be open-minded and adaptable to change” (p. 5). Since the assimilator’s effectiveness relies on giving the learner repeated situations, the CE learner uses each succeeding situation as experience that will aid in the intercultural sensitizing of the next situation. Therefore, the CE learner should readily accept and learn from this activity

In terms of the reflective observer (RO) type of learner, the culture-general assimilator is also useful. The assimilator’s arrangement allows for the learner to “observe” each given situation and reflect on how to best respond. Innate to the RO learner is their need to carefully look at all various options before making a decision. The culture-general assimilator provides the learner with this opportunity. However, at the same time, the purpose of the assimilator is to get the learner to be able to more readily make an appropriate decision based on cultural knowledge because in real life situations there is not always adequate time for reflection. By nature, the RO learner wants to take time to reflect and intercultural interactions do not always

allow for this. Hence, for the RO learners in our university sample group, it would be most appropriate to discuss this with them and use the assimilators to help them practice and taking risks making quicker decisions.

Similarly, the abstract conceptualist (AC) learner, may have some of the same tendencies and needs as the RO learner. In addition, though, the AC learner would need to have the theory behind the culture-general assimilator explained in order to know its place in intercultural learning. If this is not mentioned, the AC learner may have a difficult time knowing how to use the assimilator. A culture-general assimilator for AC learners in the university group would best be taught through the introduction of attribution theory and how it can affect one's relationship with students.

As with CE learners, active experimentation learners would probably be more readily receptive to culture-general assimilators than RO and AC learners. Their desire to take risks and "get things done" (p. 5) would be satisfied through the assimilators demand that the learner make a choice that may be right or wrong. In addition, the CE learner would like using this activity because it allows them to "take action" in the hypothetical situations that are presented in the assimilators.

### **How do the assimilators affect one's ethnocentrism?**

Using Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (1986) as a measurement, the culture-general assimilators could assist in the university housing superintendents and resident assistants' movement towards ethnorelativism. With them having little intercultural experience, culture-general assimilators would be an appropriate tool to use with them. Having little intercultural experience, they would probably be in the defense or minimization stages, which would make competently dealing with international students difficult to some degree. The assimilators, then, would be helpful in showing that not all groups of people think, feel, or act in the same way as them.

The assimilators give accounts of situations that are cross-cultural and demand that the learner recognize cultural difference. When various assimilators are given successively, the learner must try to improve their ability to get the "correct" answer. If they are able to do this, it shows that they are at least recognizing cultural difference. Hopefully, their improvement in answering the questions means that they are understanding that cultural difference demands their sensitivity. However, at the same time, it would be highly unlikely that the assimilators alone could move the housing group past minimization. The lack of real cross-cultural involvement in the activity prohibits the experience needed to genuinely accept cultural difference. Perhaps, only through their actual interaction with and management of international students could they really move into the acceptance stage since the assimilators, by themselves, only present an imagined circumstance, but probably even this is unlikely. As a result, the goal of using the culture-general assimilator should not be to move people out of minimization. The main goal should simply be to nudge individuals in that direction.

### **What are the major risks of this activity for the learner?**

Compared with other cultural teaching devices, the culture-general assimilator is a

relatively low-risk activity. Unlike role plays or simulation games, the assimilator only asks the learner to respond to a hypothetical situation in a book. It does not ask the learner to become physically involved. Most assimilators use a fictitious character in the stories and don't make the reader a part of the given circumstance. As a result, the reader may look at the situation as an outsider witnessing the situation. Perhaps the most challenging demand on the learner is to empathize with the situation. While this may not elicit large amounts of stress for most, the activity does have some risks.

For those who may be in denial or minimization and have had little intercultural experience, like the sample group of university housing personnel, the activity may cause the learners to make broad generalizations about groups of people. The assimilator stories, while striving to improve general cultural sensitivity, are culturally specific. Each one presents a specific cultural circumstance and through the repeated administration, one develops a general cultural sensitivity. However, in doing this, there is a danger that learners will take the specific situations in the stories and generalize it for the whole population of people of that particular group.

Another risk of this activity is that it challenges the learner to be intercultural. For those in denial or minimization, this request can be troubling and intense because it asks them to make a "paradigm shift" away from their conventional frame of mind. This can cause learners to examine and ultimately question their own identity. Needless to say, if taken seriously, the scrutiny of identity and culture can cause great stress. Hence, if learners see this as a possibility it will appear threatening and they may be reticent to become involved.

### **What are the advantages and disadvantages of using this activity?**

Generally speaking, despite the above risks, I would maintain that the advantages to using this activity outweigh the disadvantages. As stated earlier, using this activity can help the learners become less ethnocentric and more interculturally sensitive. For the university housing group, using this activity might allow them to be more open to recognizing and accepting cultural difference in dealing with international students. With the relative low risk of taking part in the activity, the potential for an increase in the ability to competently manage the interaction between American and international students is great.

The one major disadvantage of using this activity, aside from the risks, is that it is not enough. Since it is general in scope, it doesn't offer the depth of experience and complexity that another culture learning activity might. When Hart, Day, Landis, and McGrew (1978) used the cultural assimilator to train U.S. Army personnel in "racial understanding," they came up with a similar conclusion. Their report stated that the assimilator was not enough in eradicating racial misunderstanding (p. 39). However, the report did concede the assimilator's use was only part of a one-day seminar on intercultural seminar and that it could be more beneficial if used alongside other activities (p. 39). Along the same lines, the culture-general activity doesn't allow the learner to obtain much culture-specific information. So learners who want to apply their gleaned intercultural skills the next day at work, for example, may find it difficult to come up with specific solutions to intercultural problems (Brislin, 1995, p. 176).

Another disadvantage of this activity is that the culture-general assimilator stories are not

readily available in large quantities. There are a few resources that offer culture-general assimilators, but these must be actively sought out. Furthermore, they are difficult to create since they require time, accuracy, and validity. If one does not have the resources or skills to make them, existing resources must be found (Albert, 1995, p. 165).

Still, if resources can be located, the culture-general assimilator can offer effective cultural sensitizing. Yook's study (1996) on using the assimilator to sensitize audiences of non-native speakers of English underscores this notion. The study concludes that people will, at least to a minimal degree, become more sensitive if the assimilator has been used (p. 99). In the case of the university housing personnel I would use Brislin, Cushner, Cherrie, and Yong's (1986) guide as a resource for assimilator stories. Their compilation of various cultural assimilators would address the housing group's role of coordinating and managing the interaction between Americans and people from all over the world.

With this in mind, hopefully the use of the intercultural sensitizer can be expanded and more sources developed. That could be the task of further study. Nevertheless, in this author's opinion, the intercultural sensitizer is clearly beneficial at its present state, especially if used in addition to other activities and over a period of time. After looking at how it can affect one's attribution-making, learning style, and ethnocentrism, the intercultural sensitizer cannot be overlooked as a valuable resource for training individuals to be interculturally competent.

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