



# ***Experiential Approach as a Useful Tool for Developing Students' Intercultural Competence<sup>i</sup>***

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## **1. Introduction**

Over the last 10 years many Polish universities have been trying to develop courses for both Polish and foreign students. Cracow University of Economics has been particularly successful in this field, receiving annually about 200 foreign students at the very popular "Polish Economy in Transition" programme and sending more than 300 Polish students abroad within various Socrates projects. These developments have imposed new challenges on the trainers and educators. Intercultural Communication, as a subject was introduced to the study programme in 1993 to help foreign students adapt to the Polish reality and prepare Polish students to study at foreign universities. The main purpose of the 30-hour course was to develop and practise intercultural competence in multinational groups of students. Intercultural competence development has thus become the starting point for considering the choice of the educational approach, training methods and techniques.

Stella Ting-Toomey [1999] claims that intercultural communicative competence 'refers to an integrative theory-practice approach enabling us to mindfully apply the intercultural knowledge we have learned in a sensitive manner'. According to Byram [1997] intercultural communicative competence is being able to interact with people from another country and culture in a foreign language - being able to negotiate a mode of communication and interaction which is satisfactory to oneself and the other interlocutors. Knowledge of the other culture is linked to language competence through the ability to use language appropriately and having awareness of the specific meanings, values and connotations of language. In case of CUE, the problem of language has to be regarded in a different context. Although foreign students who came to Poland for one or two semesters have Polish languages classes, it would be impractical to expect them to speak fluent Polish. Intercultural competence has to be treated as an ability to interact and co-operate successfully within a multinational academic community, in English as a practical lingua franca.

## **2. Theoretical background.**

### **2.1 Main assumptions**

The design of the Intercultural Communication course programme has been based on the assumption that intercultural competence similarly to linguistic competence or communicative competence involves not only knowledge, but also skills, though in case of intercultural competence there is also a third, affective component: awareness. It was assumed that this similarity should affect methodology and the syllabus has been thus built around David A. Kolb's model of experiential learning [Kolb 1984]. Experiential learning can be described as learning that arises out of reflection upon one's own experience that leads to purposive action which comes as a result of the reflection. This process leads to further experience and reflection, so that experiential learning can be seen as a continuous cycle of repetitive pattern.

### **2.2. Progressivism**

The basis of experiential learning can be traced back to progressivism - an educational philosophy developed by John Dewey - an American philosopher and educator. He claimed that education should involve two crucial elements: respect for diversity and the development of critical, socially engaged intelligence that enables individuals to co-operate to achieve a common goal. The first element underlines the individuality of each student, with respect to his own abilities, interests, ideas, needs and, of course, his cultural background and identity. The second - leads to an educational model based on the assumption that people are social creatures who learn most effectively through active interaction with others and that learning increases when one is engaged in meaningful activities. As a result of these theoretical considerations Dewey proposed a five-step method for solving problems:

1. Become aware of the problem;
2. Define it;
3. Propose various hypotheses to solve it;



4. Examine the consequences of each hypothesis;
5. Experience and test the most likely solutions

According to Dewey, a progressivist teacher should provide not just reading and drill, but also real-world experiences and activities that focus on the real life of the students. A typical progressive slogan was “learn by doing”. Until the mid of the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressivist ideas had been developing in the USA, however during the time of the cold war anxiety and cultural conservatism, progressive education was widely repudiated and partly abandoned. Nevertheless, in the years since various circles of educators have rediscovered the ideas of Dewey and his followers, revised them in order to adapt to the changing needs of education institutions, children, students, managers and society in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Open classrooms, co-operative learning, Problem Based Learning, task-based learning, communicative approach in foreign language teaching, experiential learning etc., all have philosophical roots in progressive education.

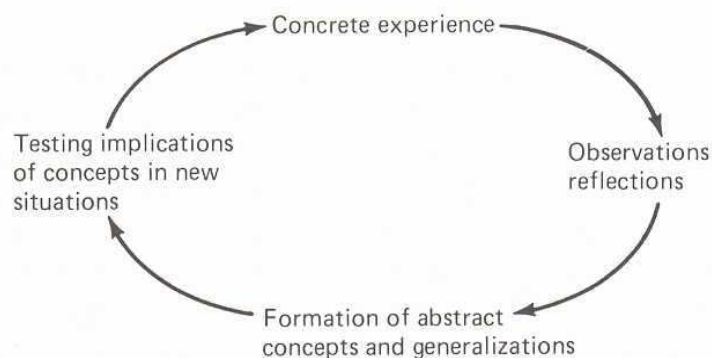
These theoretical principles can be related to language acquisition theory - Krashen's Monitor Model and, especially one of his hypotheses in which he states that “acquisition” is more effective than conscious “learning”. While acquisition is based on subconscious, meaningful experience and leads to the development of language skills, learning requires conscious efforts in a formal learning environment, and though it increases students' knowledge, it does not necessarily lead to improved competence. Krashen states, that learning can only reinforce acquisition.

### 2.3. Experiential learning

The term “experiential learning” is used by researchers in two senses (Brookfield, 1983). One claims, that it is just ‘education that occurs as a direct participation in the events of life’ [Houle, 1980], not connected with any formal institution, but only with the people involved in it. It is gained through reflection on everyday experience and similar to ‘acquisition’ in Krashen's sense. The other refers to education opportunities provided to students who have the chance to acquire and apply knowledge, skills and feelings in a specific, relevant environment. Borzak claims, that experiential learning involves a ‘direct encounter with the phenomena being studied rather than merely thinking about the encounter, or only considering the possibility of doing something about it. [quoted in Brookfield, 1983]. This kind of learning is connected with the policies of educational

institutions and conscious implementation of particular methodology principles to curricula and syllabuses.

David A. Kolb with co-operation with Roger Fry based his famous experiential learning methodological model on Lewinian concept of four elements: concrete experience, observation and reflection, the formation of abstract concepts and testing in new situations. This model is based



Learning cycle can start at any of the above points and can be approached as a recurring pattern, but Kolb claims, that the learning process begins most often with a student experiencing a particular situation. After that, upon reflecting upon his experience, he tries to realise and understand the relation of cause and effect, in order to predict under what circumstances the same stimulus would lead to the same reaction. Logically, in this pattern the next step would be the understanding of the general principle under which the particular instance falls. When this is done, according to Kolb, the next stage should be based on the application of action in new circumstances, but within the same model of generalisation.

Experiential learning has been criticised on various grounds. The reservations concern insufficient attention to the process of reflection, inappropriateness of its application to all situations, not taking into account different cultural experiences and conditions (Anderson 1988), weak empirical support [Jarvis, 1987] and problematic relationship between the learning process and knowledge. Jarvis [1987] questions the assumption that ‘Knowledge results from the combination of grasping experience and transforming it.’ [Kolb, 1984] on the ground that Kolb does not take into account various ways of knowing and neglects the complexity of the notion. However, Tennant [1997] claims that ‘ the model provides an excellent framework for planning teaching and learning activities and it can usefully employed as a guide for



understanding learning difficulties, vocational counselling, academic advising and so on.'

#### 2.4 Problem-based learning (PBL)

Problem-based learning began at McMaster University Medical in Hamilton, Canada, over 25 years ago. It has since been implemented in various undergraduate and graduate programs around the world, e.g. at Breda Business School in the Netherlands. Students synthesise and construct knowledge to bring solution to problems in a way that meets the conditions that they themselves set forth. PBL is both a curriculum and a process. The curriculum consists of carefully selected and designed problems that demand from the learner acquisition of critical knowledge, problem solving proficiency, self-directed learning strategies, and team participation skills. The process replicates the commonly used systemic approach to resolving problems or meeting challenges that are encountered in life and career. Students involved in problem-based learning acquire knowledge and become proficient in problem solving, self-directed learning, and team participation. Studies show that PBL prepares students as well as traditional methods. PBL students do as well as their counterparts from traditional classrooms on national exams, but are in fact better practitioners of their professions.

#### 2.5. Task-based learning (TBL)

Scrivener [1995] and Willis [1996] developed the idea of task-based learning in foreign language methodology. According to them 'tasks can be used as the central focus in a supportive methodological framework' and it 'combines

the best insights from communicative language teaching with an organised focus on language form' [Willis, 1996]

Willis claims that exposure to a rich but comprehensible input of real spoken and written language, meaningful use of the language and motivation to interact with others in the target tongue, are the essential conditions for language learning, while instruction, i.e. chances to focus on form, is desirable. These teaching principles, obviously descending from progressivist philosophy and experiential learning, have been more and more broadly used by language teachers now.

#### 2.5 Intercultural training methodology assumptions at the CUE

The design of the syllabuses for Intercultural Communication at the Cracow University of Economics is based on the creative adaptation and eclectic combination of the teaching principles described above. Although they refer to different levels of didactic instruction, i.e. from educational philosophy, through learning goals and approaches to teaching strategies and classroom procedures they are deeply intertwined and share most of the aspects, such as: learner-centred orientation, reliance on students' own experiences as the starting point for the process of learning, reference to the affective factor, task-orientation and preference for subconsciously acquired knowledge over the formal instruction.

Intercultural Communicative Competence components

Knowledge  
 Skills  
 Awareness

Conditions for learning (acquisition)

Exposure  
 Use  
 Motivation  
 (Instruction)

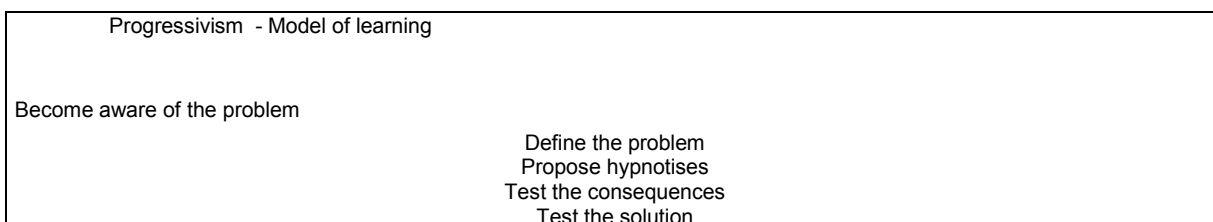


Table 1. Progressivist model of learning



Models of learning

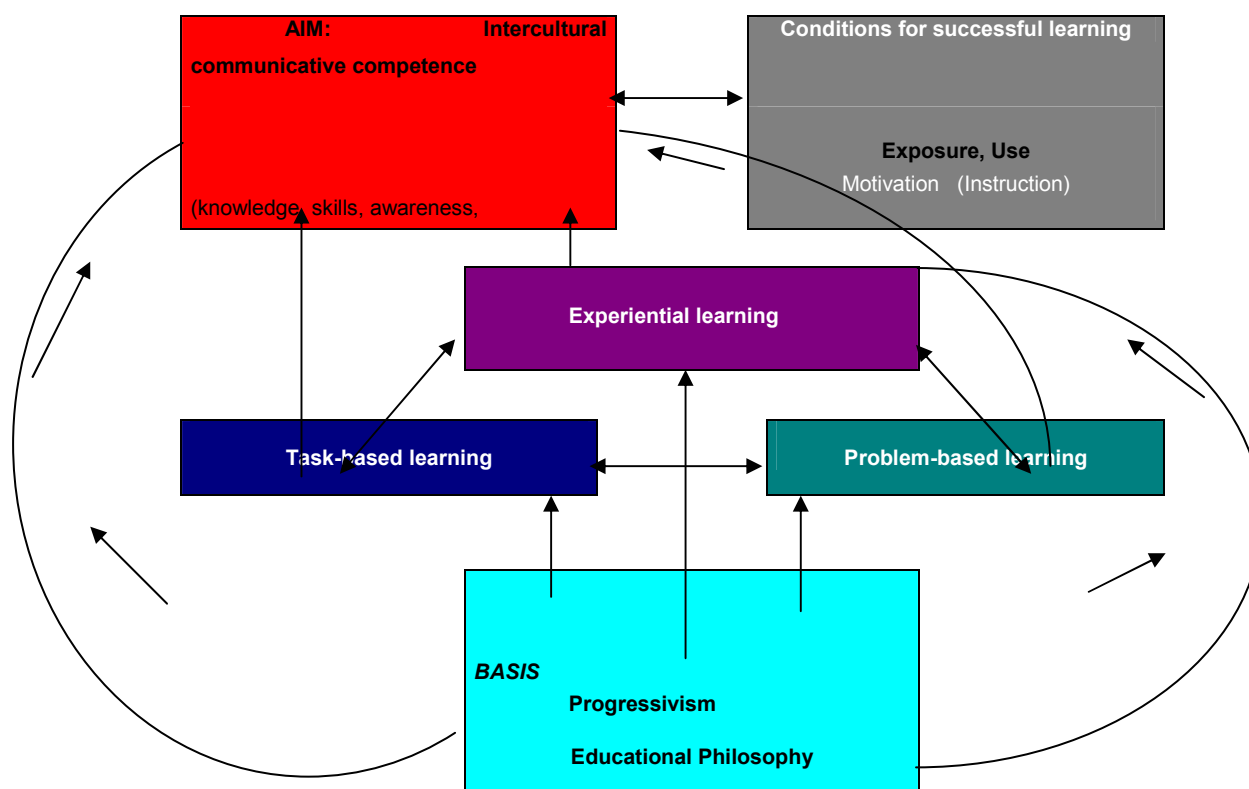
Experiential learning	Problem Based- Learning	Task-based leaning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Concrete experience</li> <li>◆ Observation and reflection</li> <li>◆ Forming abstract concepts</li> <li>◆ Testing situations</li> <li>◆ Returning to concrete experience</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Read the problem</li> <li>2. Brainstorm hypotheses</li> <li>3. Individual reading, self-study</li> <li>4. Presentation of results in groups</li> <li>5. Review, report, assess, self-evaluation</li> <li>6. Remedial learning and teaching: extra self-study and lectures</li> <li>7. Result testing approaching a new problem</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Pre-task activities: (introduction of the topic and task, instructions)</li> <li>2. Task cycle:                             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Performance of the task</li> <li>b. Planning and rehearsing the report</li> <li>c. Report (oral or written presentation, feedback)</li> </ol> </li> <li>3. Language (knowledge-skills) focus                             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. analysis</li> <li>b. practice</li> </ol> </li> </ol>

Table 2. Comparison of procedures in various models of learning based on Progressivism

Experiential, task-based and problem based learning methodology has been assessed as particularly useful for developing students' intercultural competence in multinational groups. Since the development of the intercultural competence refers to students' knowledge, awareness and skills, they are given the chance to gain intercultural knowledge during formal lectures and through reading when preparing their presentations and papers. They are exposed to formal instruction and intercultural encounters and experiences when interacting in multinational environment.

Their intercultural consciousness and sensitivity is developed during workshops, when they analyse case studies (become aware of and define the problems) and

their own foreign encounters and experiences are discussed. Here, they go through observation and reflection process and try to propose hypotheses and form abstract concepts. Through these activities they not only learn about other students' cultures, but by looking at their own cultural values, norms, and attitudes through their peers' eyes –gain awareness of their own identity, cultural mindsets and the relative character of the latter ones. During these activities they also acquire the third element of intercultural competence – skills. Finally they are motivated, by implementing the acquired knowledge and skills to design and carry out a project preferably in a multinational team in order to achieve the goal (or fulfil the task)



**Table 3. Model of theoretical assumptions for intercultural communicate programme design**

### 3. Examples of application of the theoretical assumptions

*Over the last 10 years several teaching techniques and procedures were tested at the Cracow University of Economics to provide the most effective methodological model for intercultural training at the academic level. Some of them were relatively quickly abandoned, other were incorporated into the curriculum. Here are three examples of the implementation of experiential learning approach and task-based learning methodology with elements of the PBL approach.*

1. Response papers developed and written in international teams of students
2. Educational film "An International Cruise Debate or the Meeting of Cultures"
3. Erasmus project "Building Cross-Cultural Competence in Europe" - an intensive short course on stereotypes.

3.1. Response papers are an alternative method of Intercultural Communication course assessment. Students are requested to submit a response paper written in international pairs or small teams, based on research and additional readings. They are given general principles and requirements concerning the project, they have access to the library and the Internet but need to negotiate within the team the specific topic, methods of mini-research and its outcomes.

They are free to find partners for the projects and advised to agree on and formulate a mini-thesis or find a "limited" research problem interesting to all members of the team, use their peers in Poland and their own countries as respondents, try to combine their findings with theory and submit a paper. They are thus exposed to **knowledge** during lectures, classes and their own readings. They later **use** the knowledge when discussing the project with other students and they are strongly **motivated** to fulfil the task: to score a good mark and compete with other teams, since the best papers are published in a student magazine. On submitting the paper they are asked to fill in a questionnaire about the process of the paper writing and the problems they had faced. By reflecting back on the experience they often notice and underline the applicability of intercultural knowledge to real life situations, and in result, the level of their intercultural competence is increased.



Here are some examples of response papers written by students in multinational groups based on their experiences and attempts to understand and interpret them.

- Polish Pessimism and Mexican Optimism - two ways of perceiving the world around us based on cultural differences
- Power Distance, Classroom Participation, and Forms of Assessment: Cultural Differences between Poland and the US
- Why is it difficult for Poles to accept a woman's position in the Islamic marriage?
- Coming Across Cultural Differences in the moments least expected (Polish-Portuguese)
- The Courtship in Poland and Nigeria
- The First Job - key differences in successful job interviews in Germany and Poland
- The influence of Communism on Culture, Customs and Behaviour of Poles. The transformation of minds.

3.2. In 1999-2000 an educational experiment was carried out, based on the same theoretical teaching model. Several students were invited to help carry out research on cultural values, norms and modes of behaviour. They participated in staff meetings when research problems were formulated, investigation methods decided upon and questionnaires designed. They helped conduct surveys with foreigners, compile data, etc. Invited to suggest the method of the result presentation, they proposed to present the outcomes in a form of a film script. After writing the first, working version, foreign students were invited to join in and act as experts and actors. Several meetings took place when the script was read, negotiated and rewritten again and again. Finally, the film "An International Cruise Debate or the Meeting of Cultures" was made and it is now used for educational purpose at the department. The project participants were **exposed** to knowledge while helping with the research, they **used** the knowledge during international meetings and were **motivated** to finalise the creative project – see their names appear on the screen. Several discussions were later held on how the project helped them gain self awareness, practise communication skills and in result – improved their competence.

3.3. In June 2003 Erasmus project "Building Cross-Cultural Competence in Europe" was carried out at the CUE in a form of a short course on stereotypes. The course programme was designed by a team of intercultural trainers from participating academic institutions (Breda Business School, NL, Ecole Supérieure de Commerce, France, Kristianstad University and Jonkoping University, Sweden and the Cracow University of Economics) An international group of 20 students participated in a two-week intensive training, analysing the phenomenon of stereotyping from various angles: academic–sociological and psychological, practical- workshops delivered by lecturers from various countries, special interest areas – classes focussed on management, interpreting, non-verbal communication, advertising etc. In the second week the students developed projects in three multinational teams and prepared presentations, delivered on the last day. The project involved theoretical and practical knowledge acquisition, application of the knowledge and the motivational element – final presentations were filmed and will serve as teaching aid in all partner institutions. Many foreign students arrive in Poland full of "old stereotypes" based on their parents' and grandparents' perceptions of communist countries. Most of the Erasmus project participants stressed in the feedback forms that the course helped them overcome prejudices and made them much more open-minded.

These three above examples show that various projects can be developed and carried out based the same methodological principle rooted in the management/ language methodology. They vary with respect to the terms of their applicability, time-consumption and cost-effectiveness, but have a definite advantage – effectively develop students' intercultural competence.

#### 4. Discussion



One of the crucial and most difficult aspects of the intercultural communicative competence is **the ability to distinguish between idiosyncratic and culturally conditioned behaviours**. On acquiring this ability the student is able to make correct attributions and conduct reasonable, meaningful interpretations of his intercultural experiences.

The choice of methodology for teaching intercultural communicative competence should be based on pragmatic criteria. Since students who study in multinational environment face and encounter intercultural experiences and have opportunities to access, verify and test their assumptions, it is wise to organise the didactic process in such a way, that they make the best use of these opportunities. As learning and teaching competencies involve students' emotions to a relatively great extent the affective factor should be involved in the process, to reinforce the knowledge, skills and motivate the students. Combination of learning models based on progressivist philosophy seem to be very useful and practicable, however, formal instruction should not be underestimated, especially in case of academic education.

#### 4.1 The role of formal instruction (traditional methodology)

Experiential learning and its varieties are not the only ways of teaching competencies and it is believed that the most effective model would be based on the combination of traditional, formal education based on lectures and readings and its application in form of experiential learning (or task or problem –based learning).

If the formal approach is totally neglected students may miss some very important aspects of knowledge acquisition e.g. the ability to look at the discipline from the bird's eye, to place the problems/issues in the broader picture in order to notice how they relate with each other and how they correspond to other disciplines. Formal lectures help them categorise and generalise what they learn through experiences and facilitate access to information concerning such areas as researchers' criticism, history of the discipline, presentation and explanations of theories and approaches, etc. which are extremely time-consuming and difficult to synthesise for students on their own. On the other hand, the lack of preparation for experiences may result in a student's inability to notice them, and if they pass unnoticed, it may be difficult, if not impossible, to reflect upon them, analyse, etc.

#### 4.2 Limitations of experiential learning methodology

There are several shortcomings of the application of experiential learning and its varieties:

- ◆ They are very time-consuming. However, by presenting various attitudes, possible solutions and analogies, formal instruction may help students make generalisations and draw conclusions. A lot of work may be based on the student's self-education.
- ◆ Individual approach may be a problem in case of big, versatile groups of students coming from various cultural environments
- ◆ Cultural barriers may be experienced on the part of trainers and students. It is sometimes difficult for lecturers to see the reasons for attempting to change their usual way of working. They find it hard to meet sometimes conflicting expectations of the students. Students' cultural mindsets and educational traditions may make the application of experiential learning very hard, if not impossible. Some students feel abandoned and disappointed if given more learning space and encouraged to exercise their autonomy. When teaching students who come from culturally different countries and represent different religious backgrounds, some of the problems, tasks, experiences described, analysed and studied, as well as the materials used in class, may cause emotional discomfort, defensive attitudes and protests.
- ◆ Sometimes students prefer and tend to lower their level of anxiety by interacting within their national 'gettos', e.g. the French communicate mainly with the French, Germans with Germans, etc. If the teaching was based entirely on experiential



learning model in case of intercultural communication the lack of exposure to experiences might be a serious drawback for the application of the methodology.

- ◆ Some students experience emotional barriers, probably resulting from the interference of the culture shock. This is easily visible when a student is going through the stages of rejection and defence. Sometimes experiential learning may help overcome emotional strains, but especially in case of one's high face-losing anxiety, the student might reject the experiential learning methodology as too affective and too involving.
- ◆ Financial and organisational limitations may also be experienced. They may restrict students' and teachers' creativity.
- ◆ Some trainers, especially the younger ones, complain that when applying experiential learning they find the lack of predictability of the results quite stressful, both on the personal level and with respect to meeting the educational goals.
- ◆ If treated superficially and in too fundamentalist way, experiential learning might eliminate the "academic" component from curricula and turn universities into vocational schools.

## 5. Conclusions

Although the model of academic educational in Poland has been rather traditional, alternative methods of instruction have been gradually introduced into the curricula. It seems that foreign language methodology (especially the ELT) and management training have been most advanced in the introduction and application of learning models based on experiential learning. Other disciplines, with respect to methodology, are still facing difficulties concerning the choices of methods, policies, decisions and applications. There is an insufficient debate on the above issues due to the assumption and convictions that for the academics, research is more important than teaching. However, the political, economic and social transformation which Poland has been experiencing over the last decade has already started imposing market also in education. Very soon even the best universities will face the necessity to struggle for students, since there is a growing number of private higher educational institutions and, at the same time, there will be fewer students on the educational market due to the declining demographic trend.

By offering a greater variety of more versatile training methods any university could not only attract more students, but become more competitive on the international educational market.

To sum up, experiential learning and other modes of learning descending from Progressivist - educational philosophy which stresses experience as the trigger for acquiring knowledge and skills, despite their shortcomings described above, are gradually becoming more and more attractive to students, since they:

- ◆ Focus on painless acquisition of competencies rather than on tedious learning
- ◆ Give the students the sense of achievement
- ◆ Are personally enriching due to promoting maturity, integration, responsibility, team-work and autonomy
- ◆ Take into account the affective factor, which helps students become involved and, in result, reinforces the didactic process
- ◆ Promote partnership between students and trainers
- ◆ Give students opportunities to learn by doing, with hands on experience. By solving problems and performing tasks and reflecting on their experiences students gradually learn how to avoid mistakes, anticipate the consequences of their decisions and are better prepared for functioning in the contemporary world of change

With respect to Intercultural Communication methodology, experiential learning has one more definite advantage. It stresses, promotes and practises ethno relativistic attitudes, crucial for the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence.

However, the introduction of the fresher, attractive methods and techniques should not question and ultimately destroy the traditional core of academic education – lectures, debates, seminars, etc. where students are faced with abstract concepts and theories. University education should not be turned into vocational training, which might happen if experiential learning is not incorporated into the curricula, but would rather substitute the existing ones.





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<sup>1</sup> Paper presented at the SIETAR Congress, Humboldt University, Berlin, April 2003