Newcomers and Intercultural Education

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Intercultural education and training (IET) has shown an impressive development in this century. Extended programs in this field are offered around the world, but they have particular strength in the European Union, the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States of America. Initially, they had different goals, such as unification in the case of the Europeans, economic and military presence abroad for the United Kingdom and the United States, and social comprehension of the native-born and newcomer in the Australian case (Averbeck-Lietz 300; Miller and Petriwskyj np). Currently, it is clear that IET is an international answer to the worldwide cultural diversity question generated by new economic, technological and social trends such as strong international interconnection and interdependence, innovation in telecommunications, extended use of the Internet as a source of information and a means of communication and the wide access to tourism and transportation services. At the core of the new social landscape, immigration appears as one of the most characteristic features of the current era (Council 13).

Immigration, as a long term process, is considered as a success when the immigrant reaches a level of assimilation into the new society that “achieves a cultural solidarity sufficient at least to sustain a national existence” (cited in Alba and Nee 1997: 827). This assimilation, as a cultural phenomenon, is built on two pillars: the immigrant’s individual cultural background and the host society’s cultural context including the opportunities it offers to the newcomer (Nauck 159). IET offers a solution on both the individual and the contextual fronts. In the first case, intercultural training offers a wide spectrum of communication resources in order to minimize cultural shock. For the host society, this
academic field attempts to increase the recognition of cultural difference as an asset to humankind and endeavors to improve the advantages of cultural encounters and to reduce their costs. (Zarzu 200).

Intercultural Education and Training for Newcomers

Immigration is a complex process which involves profound changes at many levels to the immigrant’s experience of life, but changes in emotional, cultural and economic patterns have the strongest effects on newcomers’ lives. As Akhtar points out, this process “can have destabilizing effects upon the mind” (Akhtar 3) and he highlights the factors upon which this effect depends (i.e.) “the age at which the move occurs, the depth of attachment to the original abode, the degree of choice in leaving it, the extent of anticipatory planning for such a change, the intrapsychic capacity to tolerate separations and the magnitude of difference between the two places of residence” (Akhtar 3). Intercultural education attempts to give newcomers a better understanding of their own culture as well as that of the host society, to adjust their expectations to the new reality and to develop new skills and competencies to face the challenges of intercultural communication. The goal of IET is to make the student competent in intercultural communication. That means, first of all, the student will gain intercultural understanding or knowledge of the new culture and become aware of the differences and the possibilities of new forms of expression that the new culture offers. To achieve this objective, the first step is to be aware of one’s own culture and to be aware of the way that this culture influences one’s own values and expectations (Bennett 224). At the same time, IET attempts to improve intercultural adjustment or perception of cultural differences that allows newcomers to behave according these differences. To do that, IET focuses on three central aspects of migration experience:
cognition, emotion and motivation. These factors allow the newcomers to align their attitudes to harmonize with the new culture (Zhou 445).

According to Berry, the way in which the attitudes and behaviours of an individual are modified by the host culture is called acculturation (Berry 28). According to this author, there are four patterns of acculturation. The first one is assimilation, in which the immigrant abandons his own culture and takes on that of the host. The second pattern is integration, which occurs when the newcomer achieves a balance between his own culture and the host culture. Separation, the third pattern, occurs when he has little interaction with the host culture and finally, in marginalization, the newcomer has no contact with either his home culture or the host culture (cited by Xie np). In the first two patterns, it is possible to have a “cultural solidarity sufficient at least to sustain a national existence” as the above definition of assimilation points out. For the two remaining patterns, this condition is more difficult to accomplish. Many authors state that the immigrant who is able to retain his original cultural identity is more likely to achieve an “immigrant satisfaction” and a better intercultural communication competence than those who have lost their culture. IET recognises this principle and works accordingly. Throughout IET, the newcomer reinforces the knowledge both of his own culture and that of the host society. He develops new ways of perceiving his role in the host society and increases his skills and competencies in intercultural communication in the work place.

Intercultural Competence in the Host Culture

Cultural diversity is at the core of the present era and in many countries immigration is a strong expression of that. In those countries, the newcomers’ presence is part of the daily reality and generates different reactions among the host society’s members. These
reactions can include the denial of cultural differences (where one’s own culture is experienced as the only real one), defense against cultural differences (where one’s culture is no longer the only one but the only valid one), minimization of cultural differences (where elements of one’s own culture are experienced as universal), acceptance of cultural differences (where one’s own culture is experienced as just one of several complex ones) and integration of cultural differences (where people interpret their identities as being at the margins of several cultures). (Hammer 424).

Members of the host culture play a fundamental role in the way in which their society offers a participative and comprehensive environment for newcomers. When there is a generalized reaction of acceptance or integration of cultural differences among the members of the host society, the likelihood of immigrant satisfaction is greater than when the members of the host society try to defend themselves against or minimize the presence of cultural differences. The host society environment of acceptance of the newcomer is manifested through the behaviours and attitudes of its members in the presence of newcomers. These behaviours are expressed in every aspect of social life, from public services, social and civic relations and especially in the work place. The importance of the work place environment in the newcomer’s assimilation process has frequently been highlighted. The influence of the work place in the newcomer’s assimilation to the host society has different components. The first one is the role of co-workers in the newcomers’ assimilation process. The relationship between newcomers and co-workers plays a “pivotal role in newcomers’ socialization” as Maria Simosi states (Simosi 304). Through their co-workers, newcomers find an affective commitment that assists them in better acquisition of training skills and a normative commitment towards their work organization (Simosi 305).
the same way the role of the newcomers’ supervisor is equally important in the work place. The supervisor’s support, in addition to the support of peers is “likely to fulfill newcomers’ needs for emotional support, sense of belonging, create a sense of indebtedness and as a consequence, make the latter more willing to reciprocate by attitudinal and behavioral manifestations” (Simosi 305). A different role is played by organizational support, expressed through administrative staff (Human Resources, payroll etc.) and through the organization’s policies, norms and culture. This role is perceived by the newcomer as providing continuity in his job and assistance in stressful circumstances. This support affects the newcomers’ perception of their supervisors’ and peers’ support. If the organizational support is not clear to the newcomers, the role of supervisors and peers is less effective (Simosi 307). In conclusion, there are several possible sources of support for newcomers in the work place: the organization itself through its administrative staff, their co-workers and their supervisors. To achieve a proactive work place environment for the newcomer requires cultural education and training for all these participants, as members of the host society.

The way members of one culture react to the behaviour of members of a different one is a factor of the differences between the two. This concept is very important when it is professional or work behaviour which is being evaluated, and has major repercussions for the way in which newcomers perceive the work place environment. In reference to the work place and work behaviour, there are four central cultural categories, developed by Laroche (Friesen 220) that show the differences between cultures. These are: power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, continuum of risk and context communication.

In the first category, societies with low power distance allow greater initiative from employees; societies with high power distance give little or no room for employees’
autonomy. In the second category, individualistic cultures appreciate personal autonomy and rights. In collectivistic societies, the group, be it the family, organization or political party, is the centre of social activity. In illustrating the continuum of risk, personal investigation of the unknown and its costs (mistakes) is a feature of risk-accepting societies. Finally, in high context societies, aspects surrounding the message are important; in other societies, the context is not as important as the message itself (Friesen 220-1). In reference to these categories, Canada is a country with low power distance, high individualism, high risk tolerance, and low context attention, as are the United States and several European countries. On the other hand, many Asian, African and South American countries show the opposite functioning of the same factors. This point is of special importance as long as the majority of immigrants to Canada continues to be from countries with high power distance, high collectivism, low risk tolerance and high context attention as has been the case for the last two decades. (Friesen 221). This means that the likelihood of misunderstanding and miscommunication in the work place between Canadians and newcomers tends to be higher, because of the differences between their cultures. According to Statistics Canada in 2011, Asia became the largest source of immigrants to Canada, with the Philippines and China as the central sources. At the same time, immigration from Africa, the Caribbean, Central and South America increased slightly between 2006 and 2011 (Statistics Canada Immigration). Similar trends can be found in immigration figures for London, Ontario. Although the majority of the immigrant population in London originated in Europe and North America including newcomers from the United Kingdom, Poland, the United States, Portugal, Netherlands and Italy, the percentage of people from South America, China, India and South Korea, has increased significantly (Statistics Canada National). This means that London has to develop a participative and inclusive environment which takes into account
the presence of more newcomers from different cultures. This emerging fact is more important in the work place, where, as we have seen, newcomers consolidate their assimilation to the host society. For this reason, an intercultural education training program in London, Ontario, oriented to the Canadian population is of great value in order to create a city with real opportunities and genuine assimilation conditions for newcomers.

In conclusion, IET is a worldwide response to the new global phenomenon of cultural diversity, and immigration is a fundamental aspect of this cultural diversity. IET helps to build favourable conditions for a successful immigration process provided it focuses on the two aspects which define the success of the immigrant: his cultural background and expectations, and the host society’s cultural context. Intercultural education attempts to give newcomers a better understanding of their own culture and of the host society culture. It can serve to adjust their expectations to the new reality and to develop new skills and competencies with which they can face the challenges of intercultural communication. On the other hand, the behaviours of the members of the host society play a central role in the creation of an environment of assimilation and opportunity for newcomers. This is particularly valid in the work place and when the members of the host society have to face a very different cultural behaviour. Canada in general and London, Ontario in particular, are facing a significant presence of newcomers from very different cultures and intercultural education training oriented to Canadians, as well as to the population of newcomers, is vitally important for a successful immigration process.

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