

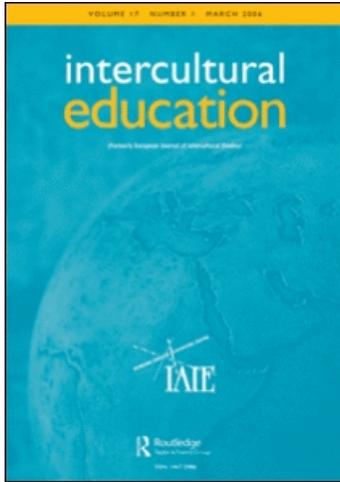
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Moving with emotional resilience between and within cultures

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Having an ‘emotional passport’ means acquiring skills to regulate intense emotional challenges experienced in cultural transitions. This paper addresses ways to help young travelers become more resilient problem-solvers, better at tolerating ambiguity, and more competent with cultural difference. It points out how the intercultural field misses opportunities to prepare learners for the emotional highs and lows of cultural exchange, relying instead on language of catastrophe (‘culture shock’) and crisis preparation. Instead, strategies can be taught to help regulate the normal stressors that come with crossing cultures. Crisis planning alone does not meet the psychological needs of most sojourners. This paper encourages a shift in language and practice from ‘culture shock’ to ‘culture shift’ by outlining how our brains process and integrate new information, and describes life stage issues facing young adults, demonstrating how these challenges interface with the emotional competencies necessary for crossing cultures.

Keywords: resilience; intercultural; self-regulation; culture shock; culture shift

Introduction

Edward T. Hall, anthropologist and founding-father of intercultural communication, writes that the Tewa tribe of New Mexico used the same word for ‘learning’ as for ‘breathing’ (Hall 1991) This is remarkable, for today we know that the best learning requires the capacity to slow our breathing in order to calmly attend, focus and integrate information. Best ‘learners’, or best problem-solvers, could be described as those who have a capacity for emotional resilience, a capacity the author calls the ‘emotional passport’. The author believes that the resilience necessary for positive intercultural exchanges involves important psychological variables that are often overlooked by students, faculty and host families.

The ‘emotional passport’ is a dynamic toolbox of skills learned and practiced during the full circle of intercultural exchange: pre-departure, on site and re-entry. Those who carry an emotional passport recognize that moving between cultures can contribute to high emotional arousal (discomfort, irritability, anger, homesickness, sadness) and understand that disengaging from emotional overload to quiet the mind will contribute to improved focus. In fact, ambiguity tolerance, a skill most noted as a building block for mastering intercultural transitions, is at the core of the emotional passport. The capacity to calm down – self-regulate – in the face of strong reactions to uncomfortable or perhaps even disturbing events is a dynamic process. Sitting with negative thoughts and feelings, perhaps feelings of discomfort in the face of

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'difference', and embracing multiple points of view is not easily developed. Providers can ensure that young sojourners acquire healthy strategies to understand and regulate intense emotional experiences.

This paper challenges the intercultural field's reliance on the language and concept of the term 'culture shock'. Cultural transitions are often a part of learning and maturing, of becoming effective global citizens. To be able to seize opportunities when crossing cultures requires a toolbox of healthy strategies acquired as part of the emotional passport. The culture shock vocabulary, which in itself imagines overwhelming stress as something students and faculty should expect, is not a healthy model. The ability to tolerate normal mood shifts that can arise when making a move into a different culture requires adult support. Without it, students' experiences can be de-railed from the beginning. Emotional roadblocks, such as the inability to regulate emotional highs and lows, can contribute to poor rather than successful outcomes. Crossing and integrating cultures is a process and, like breathing, not a single event.

In the intercultural adjustment process, a student can shift from periods of curiosity and enthusiasm to periods of withdrawal, self-doubt and sometimes self-destructive behaviors such as compulsive eating, drinking and/or drug use. Helping students and faculty to understand the context of these low periods and offering tools to self-regulate the normal intense emotions that come from cultural transitions are key to students becoming invested learners. This paper discusses how a mental health or wellness perspective can contribute to students becoming better learners, and to programs becoming more able to facilitate healthy intercultural transitions.

Interculturalists and mental health professionals have some important things in common. They share a curiosity about the ways in which people organize their experiences – they want to understand how people make meaning from their lives. The author believes that it is the job of these professionals to help young adults sharpen their lenses to interpret better and make meaning of intercultural contexts. This involves helping them to understand the meanings behind the high levels of emotional arousal (varied moods) that tend to accompany intercultural exchanges – all steps toward a healthier, more flexible adulthood.

Crisis (medical) lens to the wellness lens

The long-held idea that culture shock is an inevitable part of the cross-cultural journey is challenged by Colleen Ward's important contribution. She describes the history linking immigration into the US and assumptions about mental illness. In the early twentieth-century, 20% of the US population were immigrants, yet 70% of the population in mental institutions were immigrants. The assumptions were that either dysfunctional people were likely to emigrate, or that intercultural contact itself produced mental illness (Ward 2004, 33–36).

By the 1980s, Ward relates, with better research, that there was a move away from a medical model towards an understanding that education in culture learning and coping skills could alleviate stress reactions. The intercultural journey began to be seen as an 'ongoing, dynamic experience, not just for the traveling student, but also for the host culture'. The emphasis began to focus on adaptation and active coping strategies in a process that 'occurs over time' (Ward 2003, 36) This has been a healthier model.

Yet, the 'shock' word and crisis focus prevails in study-abroad materials, and programs continue to use catastrophe 'shock' language. From a twenty-first century mental health point of view, 'shock' is not a normal emotional state, and the use of

language that predicts catastrophe sets up students, advisers and host families for problems. What is communicated with 'shock' language is that the expression of intense feelings can be serious or abnormal, and yet intense emotions (verbally or non-verbally) are commonly part of transitions. The process of growth and change, which is built into international exchanges, demands emotional adjustments which rarely are without challenges, but also rarely shocking or catastrophic.

The mental health focus for international exchange, often centered on safety and crisis, makes clinical sense. But such focus reflects a small portion of what the mental health contribution could be for the field. The crisis message is: 'Be prepared for those very few who might develop a psychiatric disorder'. The field's standard of attending to the mental health of students seems to be 'no problem unless a crisis problem', becoming a '911' approach, not a message of prevention. This deficit can leave students more symptomatic and at risk than need be. It is one thing to offer sound intellectual challenges but, without the integration of emotional support and academics, programs become vulnerable to de-railing their goals. A crisis lens alone is a twentieth-century way of looking at human beings as 'troubled creatures in need of repair' (Lambert 2007).

Continuing the use of culture shock vocabulary reveals how negative language can inhibit healthy support for students. Many exchange programs still present the culture shock model of four stages, or the U-curve. The first two stages of Euphoria and Irritability/Hostility describe intense emotions: 'Euphoria', on arrival, the part students have anticipated, and 'Irritability and hostility', when students later discover that initial positive energy has turned negative. The research shows, however, that many students do not necessarily feel euphoric in the initial weeks – in fact, many students feel confused and disoriented (Ward 2003), but varied and intense mood reactions overall are what is important. Words such as 'shock' and 'hostility' portray a dire situation, and expectations for 'shock' can become behaviors experienced as emergencies. Shock is not healthy and should not be called normal.

Even though the field has developed alternative ways of understanding and supporting students (e.g. J. Bennett 1998), the crisis model prevails. It becomes easy to dismiss a student as 'just having culture shock', and to miss opportunities for healthy intervention. An awareness of strategies to handle stress reactions has not often translated into practice. The phrase 'mental health' itself continues to conjure up for many providers images of depressed or ill people, and these misperceptions end up contributing to poor service. Since there is rarely training for prevention, or the active inclusion of mental health professionals in intercultural exchanges, it has been easy to relegate 'emotional' challenges to crisis interventions.

Moving from symptoms to signals

There is a more useful lens from which to describe the emotional transition process. Instead of shock 'symptoms', the author suggests re-labeling the clinical language and calling stressed behaviors 'signals' – to alert the adult support system that a student has been affected by the host culture and the loss, even temporarily, of home. Moving away from the language and expectation of 'shock', one's lens can be better focused on noticing, even expecting, mood shifts as a starting point for responding. Reframing 'irritability and hostility' as not 'just part of a phase' reminds us that strong emotions might come and go throughout the journey, and that these feelings can be a normal part of the emotional transition.

Here are typical behaviors that can get the attention of faculty, host families and resident directors: homesickness, boredom, withdrawal, need for excessive amounts of sleep, compulsive eating or drinking, stereotyping local people, reduced ability to work effectively and physical ailments. These *signals*, not symptoms, are not an endpoint. They are ‘clues’ that a student is on overload and needs to pull back and re-balance. In fact, any of these behaviors can ‘signal’ that a student has been affected by changing cultures.

It should be kept in mind that, initially, one may not know the meaning of signal behaviors – early intervention requires knowing the students well. When in doubt, one should seek consultation from a licensed mental health professional and a medical doctor.

Stress and coping: a wellness model provides a more normal frame of reference

Following are some examples of normal experiences which illustrate some challenges for the intercultural field.

- The author recently received an email forwarded from a friend’s daughter Stephanie, who is studying in Prague for the year. She had been away for three months and wrote home expressing doubts about her decision to study abroad. Stephanie feared speaking with peers or advisers about her boredom, loneliness and confusion, worried that it would ‘break a rule’, or appear weak to admit that she was unhappy. And she felt her academic work had been negatively affected by the emotional burden. Unfortunately, she assumed little tolerance from staff for her low moods. Just toughing it out, even if one is miserable, seems a poor policy.
- In interviews with American faculty who lead overseas programs, it is not uncommon to hear the following phrases describing some of their students: ‘having a hard time of it’, ‘sheltered and tentative’, ‘intimidated by new experiences’, ‘unprepared for things that aren’t comfortable’, ‘self-medicating with alcohol’, ‘entitled and not hardy’. In general, these are ‘normal’ students who come to programs with no diagnoses or medications, young adults with little practice in self-care around emotional arousal. Faculty do not feel prepared to help students regulate emotional intensity, often finding themselves angry at students who do not ‘behave’.

New learning, especially the overload brought with crossing cultures, can bring exhaustion and negative moods. A healthier model would include attention to supporting skills for emotional regulation. It is not easy to acquire an ‘emotional passport’. In fact, as Milton Bennett writes: ‘Intercultural sensitivity is not natural. It is not part of our primate past, nor has it characterized most of human history. Cross-cultural contact usually has been accompanied by bloodshed, oppression, or genocide’ (M. Bennett 1993, 21)

Part of the training for intercultural sensitivity must go beyond cognitive and behavioral information transfer. Becoming better skilled to expect and regulate emotional overload can add enormous benefit to students’ mastery of ‘difference’. First, they can learn to identify and anticipate feelings or ‘signals’ of discomfort when exposed to new challenges. It is a skill to acknowledge that one feels uncomfortable, and it takes practice to calm intense emotional responses that are elicited when one

feels separated from the usual comfort zones. Typically, people will choose to dismiss, deny or over-react to feeling aroused. (And lack of awareness and skills can lead teens and young adults to manifest those ‘signals’ that have so often been attributed to ‘culture shock’.)

The author believes that the intercultural field will be strengthened by incorporating skills to address the mental health needs of what one could call the ‘normal’ study-abroad student, those who might have extended homesickness, those who are away from family and friends for the first time, those who were used to success and who melt down because they cannot ask for help, or those who annoy staff by seeking a high quantity of attention (and just might be anxious).

Another layer: how adolescence and young adulthood affect the acquisition of the emotional passport

Keep in mind that there are specific and complicating layers of emotional challenges for the college and high school population, more so than with sojourners of other age groups. In general, students from ages 17 to 23 are in a vulnerable period in human development. The psychosocial tasks of this life stage, consolidating one’s identity and exploring relationships, can contribute to seeking out the kinds of opportunities international exchange programs offer. Students might choose to study in a new culture because they are eager to explore ways to sort out who they are and what they want to become, and in this process of exploration, at least for Western students, there can be emotional ground swells: normal mood swings, challenges to authority, changing one’s mind or relationships, becoming ‘someone else’.

With identity development come questions about one’s own culture, or decisions to dismiss rules set by those representing ‘new parents’ abroad. Questioning one’s role in one’s home community can be transferred to doubts about ‘belonging’ in the host community. There are often many transitions into and out of groups and relationships. As a normal period of experimentation, of practice, trial and error, a life-stage transition becomes layered and interfaced with a cultural transition. In addition, faculty are often at mid-life, possibly experiencing their own reassessment of life choices.

So the normal young student embarking on an intercultural journey experiences age-appropriate challenges layered with the expected intense emotional arousal that comes with facing and feeling ‘difference’. Because there are so many uncertainties in cultural transitions, some anxiety would be expected. For example, exposure to so many new experiences requires maintaining a high level of alertness. So, the initial discomfort or confusion might signal the beginning of settling in. Your body is putting you on notice that you have arrived. In order to keep an open mind, to be flexible and curious, and to have tolerance for differences, students must learn that regulating high arousal, the practice of getting comfortable with change, is part of self-care. Adult support is critical, so that a student’s highs and lows will not contribute to de-railing positive goals. Unregulated stress can overload one’s capacity to think clearly and make good decisions. Part of anticipating challenges requires the use of strategies for self-care.

What is behind the variety of stress ‘signals’ that contribute to the process of transition? Research in neuroscience offers guidance to the intercultural field.

By attending to the way in which the human brain processes intense emotions, one can support students’ process from an informed and helpful position (e.g. Siegel 2007)

The human brain operates a bit like a battery through an oscillation of energy – energy spent and energy renewed. We *consume* energy during periods of activity or concentration and *renew* energy in periods of quiet or disengagement. This cycle is essential to the process of learning. As psychologist Jim Loehr (2003) writes, maximum performance requires periods of emotional disengagement. After a period of concentration, the brain needs to recover, and then another focused period can begin. As result of intense and new learning experiences, fatigue sends our body signals to disengage. If we ignore the need to re-fuel, behaviors that have been called ‘culture shock’ can follow, e.g. irritability, withdrawal, hostility. Fatigue from high arousal has consequences, contributing to difficulty concentrating and decreased performance.

American culture works against promoting the stress and recovery cycle because it encourages little practice with self-regulation. Taking time out is seen as a weakness. Understanding that best performances come with the practice of disengaging from high arousal, providers can better serve their student population by integrating wellness practices into program planning.

For young travelers, the excitement at each stage of pre-departure, arrival and re-entry uses high levels of energy. With so many uncertainties in transitions, maintaining a high level of focus is necessary, yet difficult. To maximize learning, stress and recovery must be balanced. A significant goal for cultural transition, then, is managing energy not time (Loehr 2003). Providers should ask themselves and their students: ‘How are we spending our energy?’ The focus for providers should be emotional regulation – not to send an alarm of ‘shock’. Young people need support to value and acquire skills for self-regulation.

So the context of intense arousal is linked to exhaustion and failure to disengage. Providers can help students to soften the highs and lows, supporting a more gradual adjustment. They must watch for the early warning signals, then support a variety of disengagement strategies – individualized and integrated into programming. Without adult support, students might disengage ‘without permission’, seeking out self-destructive behaviors that can de-rail their goals and the program’s success. Calming down, one feels more in control, more able to make informed choices, and more ready to take in the rich culture learning available. A quieter mind promotes the capacity to tolerate discomfort, uncertainty and ambiguity, leading to better problem-solving and greater potential for intercultural sensitivity.

The ‘aroused brain’ and wellness practices

To return to Stephanie, the student in Prague: generally, she is a good problem-solver, planner, optimistic and tolerant, but today, three months into her year abroad, she is feeling fatigued, irritable, confused and worried. Negative emotions are clouding her thoughts. This is what is happening: it is known that, with high levels of arousal, the language/problem-solving center of the brain’s left hemisphere goes ‘off line’, and the right hemisphere, the seat of emotional expression, without language, takes over (see Figure 1). Feeling upset, Stephanie has little capacity to make good choices. For her, the signals to disengage are sounding. She needs time out to reduce her anxiety, quiet her mind and get back on track. It is not a good learning day for her. Remember, her capacity to be fully engaged depends on her ability to disengage periodically (Loehr 2003, 38 and 97). Adult support is essential. She must trust that seeking help for

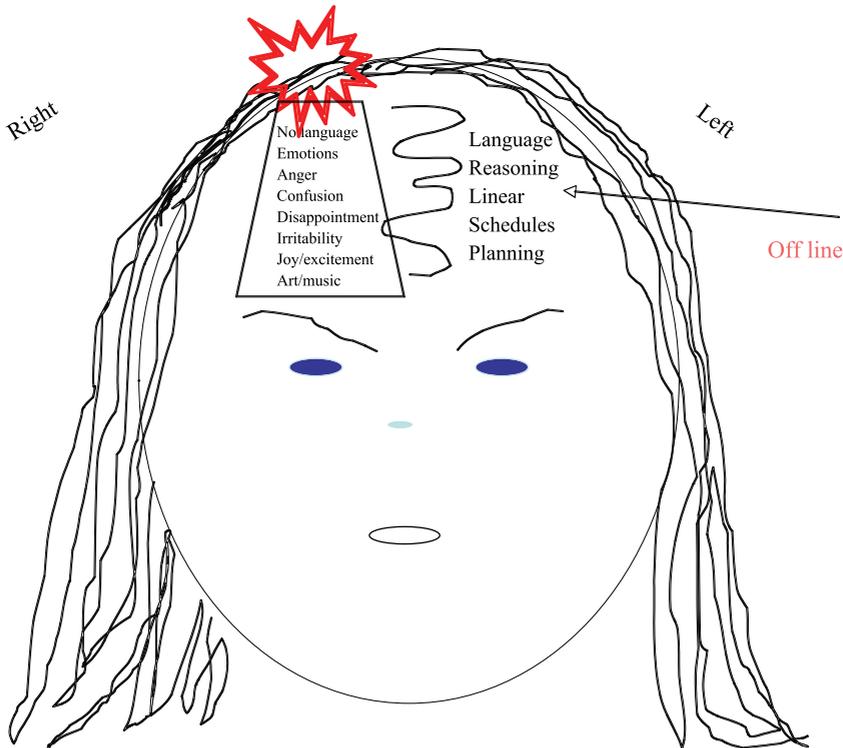


Figure 1. Intense emotions inhibit left-hemisphere 'linear' problem-solving.

emotional overload is expected, normal and easy to come by. Adult providers need to demonstrate preventive interventions, not dismiss Stephanie as 'having culture shock'. Growth and development requires facing and solving problems – building skill sets. There are opportunities here for Stephanie and the adults around her. With practice respecting her oscillating energy, her highs will be more moderate and her lows not so deep.

Opportunities with disengagement

There are opportunities when worries emerge. How does disengagement work? How does one refuel? What are some ways to self-regulate those normal intense emotions that come with cultural transitions?

If self-calming provides the space to problem-solve, one's toolbox should contain a variety of ways to meet students' needs. Think of the opportunities as building scaffolding, because the capacity to self-observe and reflect comes with practice. Students must be sure to practice at pre-departure, reinforce and add to the toolbox on site, and review again at re-entry. Skills need to be rehearsed along the way so that one feels more in control when those out-of-energy and anxious moments arise.

There are many ways to harness wellness practices to support positive moods and focused learning. The author usually starts with encouraging breathing practices (what the Tewa tribe knew long ago about learning). Deep breathing slows the heart rate and

lowers blood pressure, both of which can be elevated if the body feels ‘danger’ in the face of ‘difference’. Fatigue can exacerbate a sense of helplessness. The sympathetic nervous system is triggered quickly, like a light switch, as the fight or flight response. The counterbalance to escalation, the parasympathetic response, is slower in coming. One can quickly lose the capacity to think clearly, and regaining one’s thinking cap takes time. Sitting quietly, closing one’s eyes, and taking in deep belly breaths takes practice. Students and staff should be encouraged to practice this simple skill along the way, so that it is easily accessed when needed.

Below are some other ideas to facilitate disengagement from high arousal. One can develop one’s own toolbox and practice.

- Create periods when cell phones, computers, and other electronics are off limits.
- Support healthy eating, minimizing high sugar intake.
- Mindful awareness: through breathing, shift attention to the present. This increases capacity for self-soothing. If you are present in the moment, you are not worrying and feel less helpless.
- Exercise moderates the impact of high arousal, but be sure to include additional strategies to supplement your toolbox.
- Yoga: a nice complement to aerobic exercise.
- Tree-forest images: practice stepping back and taking stock of the moment.
- Half-smile. Try it!
- Change the channel: Visualize a set of images ahead of time so that they are a resource, e.g. Channel 8 could be the immediate imagined catastrophe, and Channel 4 (pre-selected) is ‘you’ sitting on your porch at home watching the sunset.
- Dial down: put your fist on your forehead and ‘dial’ down your high intensity to a lower level. This is a re-set to a quieter place and provides a pause to begin clearer thinking.
- The arts: use a variety of possibilities around the arts – music, painting, dance, singing, poetry, pottery, all provide respite from high arousal.

The capacity to calm down – self-regulate – in the face of strong reactions to uncomfortable or even disturbing events is a dynamic process. With a refueled brain, there is more energy to sit with negative thoughts and feelings. Calmer, one can then begin to put things into perspective and embrace multiple points of view and alternative interpretations. Working with this process is part of what one can offer young sojourners.

Conclusion

When students arrive, we should like them to have ‘packed’ their ‘best brains’. We can help them build in rest cycles to maximize their intercultural experience. We can guide them to recognize uncomfortable feelings which might emerge in the face of ‘difference’, and we can teach them strategies to support a readiness to become more sensitive to intercultural challenges. We have a responsibility to be aware that emotional highs and lows *will* be a part of the intercultural journey and to help our students trust that the adults around them *will* welcome conversations about the emotional passport.

Note

1. The brain's left-right division, for the purposes of this discussion, are schematic. Van der Kolk's (1996) work with trauma patients revealing brain functioning under stress has been adapted in this paper. This is not to infer that students are experiencing trauma, but to link ideas about high emotional arousal with the impact on language. 'When people are frightened or aroused, the frontal areas of the brain, which analyze an experience and associate it with other knowledge, are deactivated ... At the same time, high levels of arousal interfere with the adequate functioning of the brain region necessary to put one's feelings into words: Broca's area. Traumatized people suffer speechless terror.' Quoted from <http://www.dana.org/news/cerebrum/detail.aspx?id=1490>.

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