



# An Educator's Guide to Intercultural Learning

Ten Ways to Inspire Learning across Difference



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## Are you an educator involved with study abroad or domestic cultural immersion experiences?

Do you enjoy the experience, but feel students aren't getting as much out of it as you'd hope? Would you like to help students maximize the learning potential inherent in such intercultural experiences?

Educational institutions are increasingly interested in fostering intercultural competence and global understanding. Many school mission statements or strategic plans now reference "global competence," "intercultural understanding," or similar. One of the key means articulated for achieving that goal is through study abroad or domestic cultural immersion experiences, which I will collectively refer to as "study away."

There's often an unstated assumption that study away experiences lead to greater intercultural competence. Unfortunately, there's a flaw in that logic.

While it has a lot of positive benefits, **research has actually shown that, on average, study away does *not* help students develop their intercultural competence.** That is, there is not necessarily a cause-and-effect relationship.

Study away research, as well as student development literature, now strongly support the idea that students need *intentional* and *frequent intervention* to help them develop their intercultural competence through study away experiences. That is, being exposed to or even immersed in another culture is not usually sufficient to help students develop intercultural competence. Educators need to help students learn to actively reflect on and make sense of their experiences, then extract and put into practice their new learning.

For a great summary of the relevant research, check out the following publication:

- ❖ Vande Berg, M., Paige, R.M. & Lou, K.H. (Eds.) (2012). *Student learning abroad: What our students are learning, what they're not, and what we can do about it.* Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

In addition to teaching your given discipline in a different country or culture, also being responsible for facilitating students' intercultural learning and growth during the experience may seem like a daunting task. But it can also be extremely *rewarding*. In addition, arming students with the tools they need to learn through their experience can actually make your job as a study away leader *easier*!

**This guide is meant to help you get started and know where to focus your efforts in order to more proactively foster intercultural learning.**

The good news is that your efforts to expand your capacities for furthering intercultural learning can have a *big* impact. You will not only help your students learn about their host culture, but also gain lifelong intercultural skills that are transferrable to any experience in which they are engaging across difference—which, let’s face it, is pretty much any time we’re interacting with other human beings!

So here are ten things you can do to inspire learning across difference:

### **#1: Understand What Intercultural Learning Is (And Isn’t)**

There are many different definitions of the word “culture.” A common analogy for culture is an iceberg. As with an iceberg, certain aspects of culture are visible. They include things such as behaviors, customs, traditions, institutions, etc. However, there’s a much larger and deeper part of culture that is more hidden. This includes our beliefs, values, and assumptions about the world. These things are usually learned implicitly and oftentimes impact our behavior without us even being consciously aware of it.



Intercultural learning is focused much more on the deep, less visible aspects of culture, or the “learned set of shared interpretations about beliefs, values, norms, and social practices, which

affect the behaviors of a relatively large group of people.”<sup>1</sup> While it’s important for study away participants to learn about the visible aspects of their host culture, learning about the history or art of a host culture or visiting key historical monuments does not likely constitute *intercultural* learning.

**Intercultural competence** can be defined as the ability to communicate and act *appropriately* and *effectively* across cultural differences. Effectively means we achieve our aims. Appropriately means we do so in such a way that any other parties involved feel respected.

**Intercultural learning** is the process of developing one’s intercultural competence, which involves increasing the complexity with which one experiences cultural differences. This is very much a developmental process. It requires not just learning about another culture or cultures, but developing understanding and skills that can be applied in a wide variety of intercultural experiences.

To provide a concrete example: Learning how to bow to the appropriate depth and exchange business cards with two hands when meeting a colleague or business partner in Japan is cultural learning. But that may not translate into acting appropriately or effectively when visiting a Native American community in the United States. However, if a U.S. student studying in Japan understands how power distance can impact interactions and has learned processes that help her reflectively observe and attend to her own judgments and automatic reactions in new cultural situations, she will not only be able to successfully greet people in Japan most of the time (and learn from the experience when she doesn’t), but will also be able to apply that understanding and those same skills when in the Native American community.

## **#2: Backward Design the Whole Program Around the Learning Objectives**

Identify what you would like for students to get out of the learning experience and stay laser-focused on those learning objectives when developing—and leading—the program. You will likely have some learning objectives that are not intercultural. However, this program is presumably taking place in another culture for a good reason. Consider including at least one or two learning objectives that are intercultural in nature. Perhaps some of your learning objectives that seem unrelated to intercultural development could be adapted to include an intercultural element. What do you hope students will learn from this experience that will serve them when engaging across difference in other contexts?

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<sup>1</sup> Lustig, M.W. & Koester, J. (2006). *Intercultural competence: Interpersonal communication across cultures* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York: Pearson.

Focusing on your learning objectives pertains not just to courses taught on the program, but the entire experience—from co-curricular opportunities and excursions to program logistics such as housing, transportation, how much time is spent as a group versus independently, etc. If, for example, your learning objectives require students to engage on a deep level with locals, you probably want to limit the amount of time you are together as a large group. This may sound obvious, but it is very common for people to choose the housing option that is easiest, or to think about how to fit in all the things they want to do during a short program, without considering how these decisions will affect the ability to achieve the learning objectives.

It is important that learning objectives are realistic and appropriate given the duration of the program, the cultural context, and student readiness.

For a more extensive discussion of how to develop intercultural learning objectives, see the following blog post or book chapter on which the post is based:

- ❖ Developing Intercultural Learning Objectives:  
[www.truenorthintercultural.com/blog/developing-intercultural-learning-objectives](http://www.truenorthintercultural.com/blog/developing-intercultural-learning-objectives)
- ❖ Harvey, T.A. (2017). Design and pedagogy for transformative intercultural learning. In B. Kappler Mikk & I.E. Steglitz (Eds.), *Learning across cultures: Locally and globally* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) (pp. 109-138). Washington, D.C.: Stylus Publishing/NAFSA: Association of International Educators.

### **#3: Incorporate Culture-General Frameworks**

For the reasons explained previously, it is important to focus not just on learning about the host culture, but also on gaining transferrable intercultural skills. In order to learn about the host culture on a deeper level in a way that also helps develop skills that will be useful in other intercultural situations, students need to learn and practice applying culture-general frameworks.

Culture-general frameworks help people understand cultural differences and similarities in value-neutral ways. For example, individualism/collectivism is a well-known cultural dimension, one type of culture-general framework. Understanding that cultures may vary in the value they place on personal independence versus the collective good can help students reflect on their own values and the values of the cultural groups they belong to, and compare these with cultural groups in the host community. Understanding what individualism/collectivism is and the fact that people may fall at different points along this spectrum, and that patterns and preferences may differ from culture to culture for valid reasons, allows students to compare and contrast in

value-neutral ways, rather than making more value-laden observations, such as, “They don’t know how to think for themselves,” or “There is a lot of nepotism here.”

The following is a short list of some key culture-general frameworks you might consider teaching your students about, as well as learning about yourself, and where to find more information about each.

### **Cultural Dimensions** (referred to by the various names below)

#### ❖ Geert Hofstede’s Dimensions of National Culture:

- Hofstede, G. (1984). *Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values* (Abridged ed.). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.
- Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G.J., & Minkov, M. (2010). *Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed). New York: McGraw Hill.
- Online: [www.hofstede-insights.com/models/national-culture/](http://www.hofstede-insights.com/models/national-culture/)

#### ❖ Florence Kluckhohn and Fred Strodtbeck’s Value Orientations:

- Kluckhohn, F.R. & Strodtbeck, F.L. (1961). *Variations in value orientations*. Evanston, IL: Row & Peterson.

#### ❖ Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner’s dimensions:

- Trompenaars, F. & Hampden-Turner, C. (2012). *Riding the waves of culture: Understanding diversity in global business* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

#### ❖ The (pioneering yet still relevant) work of Edward T. Hall:

- Hall, E.T. (1969). *The hidden dimension*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Hall, E.T. (1973). *The silent language*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Hall, E.T. (1977). *Beyond culture*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Hall, E.T. (1984). *The dance of life: The other dimension of time*. New York: Anchor Books.

## Communication Differences

- ❖ Communication Styles
- ❖ Pacing Styles
- ❖ Types of Non-Verbal Communication

These communication differences are discussed in most good intercultural communication textbooks. The following are a few recommended texts:

- Ting-Toomey, S. & Chung, L.C. (2012). *Understanding intercultural communication* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Oxford University Press.
  - Martin, J.N. & Nakayama, T.K. (2013). *Intercultural communication in contexts* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
  - Sorrells, K. (2016). *Intercultural communication: Globalization and social justice* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
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- ❖ Intercultural Conflict Styles
    - Hammer, M.R. (2008). Solving problems and resolving conflict using the intercultural conflict style model and inventory. In M.A. Moodian (Ed.), *Contemporary leadership and intercultural competence: Understanding and utilizing cultural diversity to build successful organizations* (pp. 219-232). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Please be aware that *how* you introduce these frameworks to students is just as important, if not more so, as *what* you choose to include. There can be a tendency for people to use these frameworks to stereotype, which you obviously want to avoid. In addition, students may respond negatively to these concepts if there is not sufficient discussion about their limitations. It is critical to emphasize that these are not meant to be prescriptive, but are simply frameworks that we could look to in order to help us understand new or confusing intercultural experiences.

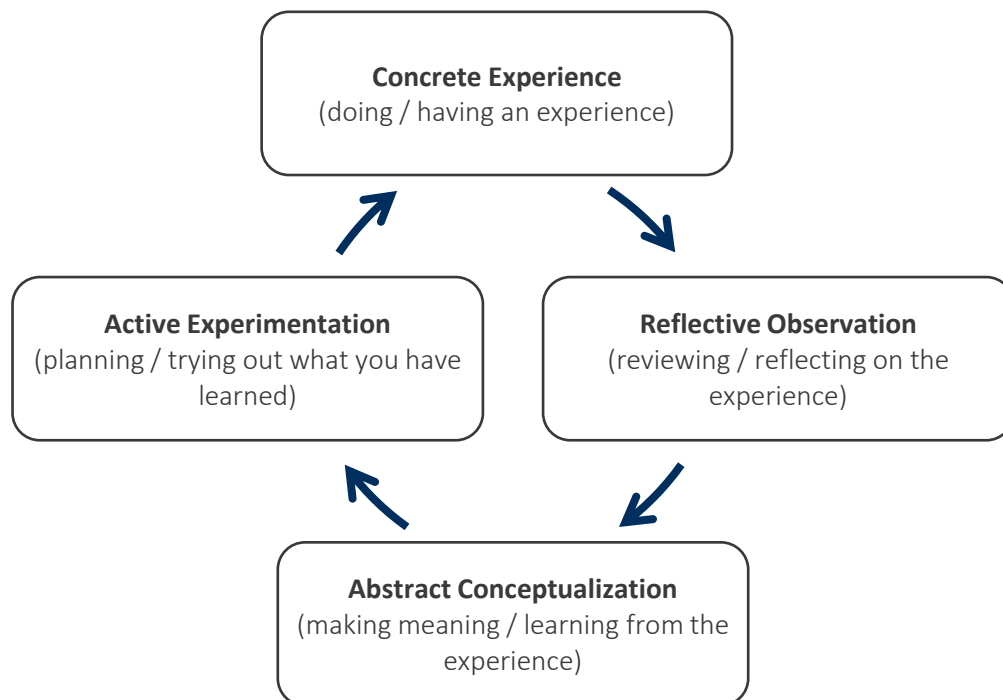
If possible, attend a workshop with a skilled intercultural trainer so that you can observe how these ideas might be presented appropriately and effectively.

## #4: Debrief, Debrief, Debrief!

In addition to providing students with culture-general frameworks, we need to help them make sense of their experiences through effective debriefing. According to experiential learning theory, experience does not necessarily translate into learning. Debriefing is a helpful way to transform experiences—from in-class activities, co-curricular excursions, or personal experiences—into learning.

We can help our students transform experience into learning by debriefing around Kolb's experiential learning cycle (see Image 1). That means we need to follow experience with reflection, meaning-making, and ultimately application of the new learning.

**Image 1: Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle<sup>2</sup>**



The following general debriefing questions can help you do this:

- ❖ How do you feel?
- ❖ What happened?
- ❖ Does this remind you of anything else you've learned or experienced?
- ❖ What have you learned?
- ❖ What will you do with this new learning?

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<sup>2</sup> Kolb, D.A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.



Prioritizing debriefing may mean you have to cut back on what you try to do in a given time. However, doing one activity and debriefing it well is likely to lead to deeper learning than doing multiple activities and not debriefing.

## #5: Provide Tools and Space for Processing

Students need to learn processes that can help them make sense of their experiences. While debriefing is a means for you to help students make sense of their experiences, providing tools for processing is essentially a way for you to help students *help themselves* make sense of their experiences.

Intercultural learning is a very iterative, developmental process, and is best approached through a spiral curriculum. You don't simply learn about individualism and collectivism, say, "I got it," and then move on to the next thing. First you learn the concepts and understand the basic idea. Then maybe you reflect on and consider how this concept or framework helps you better understand yourself, your own values and background.



Later, you are perhaps trying to make sense of a personal experience you had, and you realize that this framework offers some new insight. At another point, you may come to understand while in the midst of an interaction that your more individualist values are in conflict with the other person's more collectivist values, but you aren't sure what to do about that. And yet another time you are able to adapt your behavior in a way that is both authentic to who you are, and yet bridges the cultural gap you have recognized between you and another individual.

This type of intercultural learning requires not just knowing about culture-general frameworks, but being able to *apply* our knowledge in cognitive, affective, and behavioral ways. There are processes we can learn and teach that will help our students (and us) along that journey. The following are a few processes I use regularly in my intercultural teaching and learning, as well as relevant resources for each:

- ❖ The Describe/Interpret/Evaluate Process – This is a well-known and widely used process that helps learners suspend judgment, consider how they are unconsciously making meaning of the world, and approach culture learning more strategically and systematically. More information is available at <http://intercultural.org/training-and-assessment-tools.html#DIE>.

❖ There are several similar frameworks that have been developed based on the original Describe/Interpret/Evaluate process. Below are a few and where you can find more information:

- Describe/Analyze/Evaluate (DAE):

Nam, K. (2012). Framework: Describe-Analyze-Evaluate (DAE). In K. Berardo & D.K. Deardorff (Eds.), *Building cultural competence: Innovative activities and models* (pp. 53-57). Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

- Observe/State/Explore/Evaluate (OSEE):

Deardorff, D.K. (2012). Framework: Observe, State, Explore, Evaluate (OSEE) Tool. In K. Berardo & D.K. Deardorff (Eds.), *Building cultural competence: Innovative activities and models* (pp. 58-60). Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

- Description/Interpretation/Verification/Evaluation (D.I.V.E.) and Observation/Description/ Interpretation/Suspension of Evaluation (O.D.I.S) Models:

AFS Intercultural Link Learning Program: [woca.afs.org/education/m/icl-for-afs--friends/7251/download](http://woca.afs.org/education/m/icl-for-afs--friends/7251/download)

❖ Mindfulness Practices – Key to becoming more interculturally competent is first learning how to slow down our tendency to react on automatic pilot, tune into the present moment, and notice our judgments. Since our habitual responses are culture-bound, they are likely to be inappropriate when we're crossing cultures. Practicing mindfulness can help us slow down, tune in, and avoid making inappropriate assumptions. According to Jon Kabat-Zinn, who is largely responsible for bringing mindfulness to the secular world, "Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally."<sup>3</sup> For more information on the role of mindfulness in intercultural learning and how to help your students develop mindfulness practices, read the following two-part blog series on this topic:

- Mindfulness for Intercultural Learning, Part I: [www.truenorthintercultural.com/blog/mindfulness-for-intercultural-learning-part-i](http://www.truenorthintercultural.com/blog/mindfulness-for-intercultural-learning-part-i)

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<sup>3</sup> Kabat-Zinn, J. (2013). *Full catastrophe living: Using the wisdom of your body and mind to face stress, pain, and illness*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.

- Mindfulness for Intercultural Learning, Part II: [www.truenorthintercultural.com/blog/mindfulness-for-intercultural-learning-part-ii](http://www.truenorthintercultural.com/blog/mindfulness-for-intercultural-learning-part-ii)
- ❖ Personal Leadership – Personal Leadership is a process that incorporates mindfulness and is richly holistic and deeply introspective. You can find more information at:
  - Personal Leadership website: [www.plseminars.com](http://www.plseminars.com)
  - Schaetti, B.F., Ramsey, S.J., & Watanabe, G.C. (2008). *Personal Leadership: Making a world of difference: A methodology of two principles and six practices*. Seattle, WA: FlyingKite Publications.
- ❖ Cultural Detective – Cultural Detective is a process that focuses on interpersonal interactions and cultural bridging and is particularly useful in merging culture-specific and culture-general learning.
  - Cultural Detective Method: [www.culturaldetective.com/what/cultural-detective-method.html](http://www.culturaldetective.com/what/cultural-detective-method.html)

## #6: Be the “Sage on the Side”

Faculty are usually experts in a given field. Teaching typically involves sharing that expertise with students. Most faculty who lead study away are not necessarily experts in intercultural learning, although they may know a lot about, or have significant experience with, the host culture(s).

However, helping students develop their intercultural competence is not about imparting our cultural knowledge to students. Rather than be the “sage on the stage,” or even the “guide on the side,” we must strike a balance. As trainer Sivasailam Thiagarajan (a.k.a. “Thiagi”) has said, we must learn to be the “sage on the side.” That is, we should use our knowledge, understanding, and (hopefully) more interculturally developed perspective to guide students along their own journey of learning from and through experience.

It can be very helpful to understand and apply several pedagogical best practices related to intercultural learning. These include:

- ❖ **Constructivism** – Constructivism maintains that reality is socially constructed, and how we make meaning of the world is highly culturally influenced. We need to help students

come into awareness of their own processes of making meaning, and help them recognize and appreciate how others may make meaning differently.

- ❖ **David Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle** – As mentioned earlier, designing programs, teaching, and debriefing around the experiential learning cycle is necessary to transform experience into deep learning.
- ❖ **Nevitt Sanford’s Challenge/Support Hypothesis** – This pedagogical theory—along with many similar theories that exist—helps us think about how to provide the right balance of challenge and support to students to get them outside their comfort zone and maximize learning through intercultural experiences. For more about this, see the following blog post:

- Getting Beyond the Comfort Zone:  
[www.truenorthintercultural.com/blog/getting-beyond-the-comfort-zone](http://www.truenorthintercultural.com/blog/getting-beyond-the-comfort-zone)

More on these pedagogies and the role they play in intercultural learning can be found in the following chapter:

- ❖ Harvey, T.A. (2017). Design and pedagogy for transformative intercultural learning. In B. Kappler Mikk & I.E. Steglitz (Eds.), *Learning across cultures: Locally and globally* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) (pp. 109-138). Washington, D.C.: Stylus Publishing/NAFSA: Association of International Educators.

## #7: Meet Students Where They Are

As adults and educators, we oftentimes forget that students are not necessarily at the same place we are developmentally. We have a responsibility to meet students where they are, not the other way around. That is, we must take into account learners’ developmental readiness, primarily their intercultural development.

Thankfully, our intercultural skills should help us do just that. Since being interculturally competent means we have the ability to frame shift and not only see something through another’s perspective, but also empathize with how that person is feeling, we can use these skills to better understand where our students are coming from, what their needs are, and how we as educators can best meet those needs. When you find it challenging to truly empathize with your students (because we all do at times!), I suggest focusing on your own intercultural development (see #10).

The Intercultural Development Continuum (IDC)<sup>4</sup>, which is based on Milton J. Bennett’s 1993 Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), offers a helpful continuum with which to assess learners’ intercultural readiness (as well as your own). To learn more about the IDC and how you might meet students where they are according to their intercultural development, check out the following resources:

- ❖ Bennett, J.M. (2008). Transformative training: Designing programs for culture learning. In M.A. Moodian (Ed.), *Contemporary leadership and intercultural competence: Understanding and utilizing cultural diversity to build successful organizations* (pp. 95-110). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- ❖ Bennett, M.J. (2012). Paradigmatic assumptions and a developmental approach to intercultural learning.” In M. Vande Berg, R.M. Paige, & K.H. Lou (Eds.), *Student learning abroad: What our students are learning, what they’re not, and what we can do about it* (pp. 90-114). Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.
- ❖ Hammer, M.R. (2012). The Intercultural Development Inventory: A new frontier in assessment and development of intercultural competence. In M. Vande Berg, R.M. Paige, & K.H. Lou (Eds.), *Student learning abroad: What our students are learning, what they’re not, and what we can do about it* (pp. 115-136). Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

## **#8: Consider Ways to Extend Learning Beyond Time Away**

If you can start the intercultural learning journey before the actual immersion experience, and extend it afterward, do it! That could take the form of pre-brief and debrief meetings, or you could consider incorporating short-term study away programs into semester-long courses.

Having time and space before and after the program to introduce frameworks and processes can take some of the pressure off needing to do so much in a short amount of time. Students can then focus more time on practicing using what they’ve learned to make sense of personal experiences during—as well as after—the immersion experience. This helps make intercultural learning a more iterative process, the importance of which was discussed earlier.

Meeting after students have returned home also provides a space for debriefing the re-entry experience and discussing how students will put their new learning to use—and continue the intercultural learning journey—after the program has ended. In addition, it can help students understand the relevance and application of their intercultural skills in domestic situations.

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<sup>4</sup> Hammer, M.R. (2009). The Intercultural Development Inventory: An approach for assessing and building intercultural competence. In M. Moodian (Ed.), *Contemporary leadership and intercultural competence: Exploring the cross-cultural dynamics within organizations* (pp. 203-217). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

## #9: Don't Forget Assessment

Don't assume that intercultural development has occurred because students enjoyed the experience or even say they've been "transformed" by it. As mentioned earlier, there are many positive outcomes of study away, with intercultural development being just one (albeit a very important one).

Remember, intercultural competence is the ability to communicate and act *appropriately* and *effectively* across cultural differences. Students might learn a great deal about their host culture, improve their language skills, or become savvier travelers, and yet these skills won't necessarily help them when engaging across difference in other situations. The important thing is to not confuse other positive outcomes with intercultural development.

To know whether students have developed their intercultural competence, it's important to use some form of assessment. Following the backward design process (see #2) when developing your program is important to ensure you are thinking about assessment from the very beginning.

There are many intercultural assessment tools. (The Intercultural Communication Institute offers a comprehensive list of intercultural training and assessment tools; see <http://intercultural.org/training-and-assessment-tools.html>.) However, these tools all measure something slightly different, so it's very important that you first know what your learning objectives are and what you want to assess before you consider what tools might be appropriate.

While these tools can help you assess your students' intercultural growth in a *summative* way, it's also important to incorporate *formative* assessment measures. That is, think about activities and/or assignments—such as role plays, simulations, journaling, reflection papers, or activities that ask students to apply processes they've learned or engage in authentic ways with locals and report back, etc.—that can provide you with information about students' intercultural learning, while at the same time offering an opportunity for you to provide feedback that will help challenge and support their learning further.

For more information about assessing intercultural learning, see the following resources:

- ❖ Challenges & Practical Realities of Assessing Intercultural Learning: [www.truenorthintercultural.com/blog/challenges-practical-realities-of-assessing-intercultural-learning](http://www.truenorthintercultural.com/blog/challenges-practical-realities-of-assessing-intercultural-learning)

- ❖ AAC&U Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Value Rubric:  
[www.aacu.org/value/rubrics/intercultural-knowledge](http://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics/intercultural-knowledge)

## **#10: Focus on Your Own Intercultural Development and Model What You Ask of Students**

Intercultural learning is definitely something *we* have to *practice* before—and *while*—we preach. Intercultural learning requires curiosity, vulnerability, humility, and an ability to engage ambiguity. We should not expect these things of our students if we are not willing and able to model them ourselves.

Research actually suggests that less interculturally developed faculty leaders tend to approach intercultural learning by explaining and interpreting the host culture, and by focusing on culture-specific learning. On the other hand, faculty leaders with greater levels of intercultural competence “spend their energy conceptualizing, assessing, and facilitating their students’ intercultural development needs. They focus on coordinating a rigorous academic program, blending culture learning with other content areas, and guiding students along in their intercultural learning experience.”<sup>5</sup>

So one important step in getting better at facilitating intercultural learning is to focus on your own intercultural development. By regularly practicing the processes mentioned previously and applying culture-general frameworks to better understand your own experiences, you improve your ability to help students do the same. For more about this, check out the following blog post:

- ❖ The #1 Thing You Can Do To Help Students Navigate Cultural Differences:  
[www.truenorthintercultural.com/blog/the-1-thing-you-can-do-to-help-students-  
navigate-cultural-differences](http://www.truenorthintercultural.com/blog/the-1-thing-you-can-do-to-help-students-navigate-cultural-differences)

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<sup>5</sup> Ziegler, N.J. (2006). *Culture learning in study abroad from the perspective of on-site staff in France and Senegal* (p. 151). Unpublished dissertation, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.

## Feeling overwhelmed? Don't worry—you're not alone!

This may seem like a lot to learn (in addition to being an expert in your field), but try not to get overwhelmed. Instead, start small and focus on your own learning first. I think you will find your effort well worth it as you witness your students, and yourself, learning and growing in new and profound ways. In addition, you will likely find yourself better able to connect with students not just abroad, but on your home campuses and in your diverse classrooms as well.

### Next Steps

The information provided in this guide is just the tip of the iceberg of what you can do to foster intercultural learning, both for yourself and your students. To learn more about intercultural teaching and learning and explore True North Intercultural's professional development programs, visit [www.truenorthintercultural.com](http://www.truenorthintercultural.com).

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