

AN INSTRUCTOR TOOL - BENNETT'S DEVELOPMENTAL MODEL OF INTER-CULTURAL SENSITIVITY [DMIS]

BY TODD ODGERS

Crossing cultures can be threatening because it challenges our sense of identity and preferred ways of being (Adler, 1977 and Barna, 1994), and "entails some of the most stressful experiences we may ever face" (Kim, Y. in Landis et. al, 2004 p. 351). Language teachers support their learners' process of adjustment and can benefit from intercul-

tural research and tools such as Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). (A detailed description of the DMIS and the Intercultural Development Inventory -- a theory based instrument that measures intercultural sensitivity as conceptualized in the DMIS-- is available at www.norquest.ca/cfe/intercultural.) While lead-

ing intercultural development retreats for teachers and faculty over the past few years, I have been struck by how powerful the DMIS framework can be for participants. Instructors have frequently noted how using the DMIS has transformed them, their teaching, and the way they create curriculum and instructional materials.



We have all known students who are adept and inquisitive in how they learn about and interact with the diverse world around them. These learners look for cues, shift their behavior, practice what they learn, and progress quickly. We have also met those who seemed to struggle, resist or take a defensive or superior orientation toward their classmates and adopted culture. A colleague many years ago referred to these learners as "bunker dwellers": they tend to remain well entrenched in their own ethnic community and find it difficult to adopt and master the new language and cultural behaviors that the life in Canada requires of them. Familiarity with the DMIS can help instructors identify and support these different learners, and facilitate better cultural adaptation.

Many of us are familiar with intercultural models created by Hall, Hofstede, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, Triandis and Gudykunst (please see the readings link

below). These different models help us compare and contrast different cultural styles, values, and behaviors. They are useful tools to help skillfully identify and work with the range of cultures we encounter in classrooms. The DMIS differs from these models in that it is a developmental model that can help us promote adaptation.

Instructors can use the DMIS framework to identify the developmental stages (denial, defense, minimization, acceptance and adaptation) of students and then plan and facilitate interactions that are appropriate to the students' requirements.

Instructors wanting to use the DMIS framework should pay attention to how each stage presents its own strengths and challenges. For example, the earlier idea of "bunker dwellers" points toward learners who are likely in the stages of denial and defense. Activities building common interest and a sense of shared experience can be very helpful at this stage. Effective activities include: sharing family information, stories of moving to Canada, missing home and the challenges faced. Fun activities around food and music are also recommended. The Heritage Days festival in Edmonton is a good example of an event designed to build a sense of shared community and is excellent for learners at this stage.

Learners like the inquisitive student, adept in interacting with the diverse world around them, will be receptive to activities that go into greater depth about the gap between their first culture and the plurality of Canadian culture. Bennett refers to these stages as Acceptance and Adaptation. Well facilitated comparison activities, critical thinking, analytical discussions and experiences, role plays, critical incidents, case studies, and internships are challenging and interactive ways to propel these learners' adaptation and competence forward.

Next there are the learners between these poles who Bennett refers to as being in the Minimization stage. These learners have moved beyond the defensive, polarized ethnocentrism of the bunker to a more expansive and inclusive place that focuses on commonality. Key characteristics with this stage are discomfort with conflict and a desire to avoid offending. Instructors should help these learners notice subtle but important differences in behavior and ways of thinking. Learning activities for this stage practice careful observation and engagement through critical incidents, film, interviews, surveys, and readings. It is important that instructors provide an opportunity to elicit and discuss these subtle but important differences in relatively safe ways. These kinds of activities help learners collect data and learn how to treat differences with respect and interest.

Minimization is a stage of development that strongly resembles some of the aspects of official Canadian multiculturalism from the 1980's in how it downplays differences for the sake of promoting a tolerant society. This can be a limiting stage for learners wanting to move toward a more complex bi/multicultural identity with the capacity to move effectively between cultures. In order to negotiate deeper, more complex issues of identity and appropriateness, learners need to move past this stage into acceptance and adaptation.

Experienced ESL/EAL teachers know that they teach much more than grammar and vocabulary. ESL/EAL teachers play an important role in helping people communicate and interact more effectively, authentically, and fully across cultures. Supporting learners' integration into Canadian society depends on their capacity to develop soft skills -- highly influenced by culture -- that will help them to transcend cultural worldviews and adapt (Laroche, 2003). Canada is diverse and growing increasingly so; the DMIS is a powerful tool we can employ. ♦



This article was written by Todd Odgers and was first published in the ATESL Newsletter: June 2009. Todd Odgers directs NorQuest College's Centre for Excellence in Intercultural

Education (CEIE). Todd's work as a trainer and educator in corporations and colleges started in the late 1980s. During ten years in Tokyo he worked with ESL and EWP instructors working in some of Japan's largest domestic and international organizations including Honda, Toyota, Mitsubishi, Nike, and Star Alliance. In Canada he has focused attention integrating diverse cultures in corporations, communities and with higher education faculty, staff, and students. Todd has an MA in Intercultural Relations, a Bachelor of Education, is CELTA certified, an Intercultural Development Inventory Administrator, an Emotional Intelligence for Diversity Train the Trainer, and intercultural coach. The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity [DMIS] is used as a core framework at the Centre for designing curricula and facilitating training. For a list of works cited in this article and other readings and resources please go to www.norquest.ca/cfe/intercultural and click on Resources for Educators.