

Increasing Intercultural Competence Through Food

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Introduction/need for innovation

International students are still migrating to the United States at an increasing rate (Institute of International Education, 2019). International students are an invaluable financial benefit to universities in developed nations, but they are also individuals who enhance these nations with their diverse heritage and perspectives, increasing cultural awareness and respect (Bevis, 2002; Harrison, 2002). The diversity of students in United States schools is growing, which points to the need for intercultural competence development to engage students from different cultural backgrounds and establish cross-cultural relationships. When interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself, intercultural competence refers to the "abilities needed to perform 'effectively' and 'appropriately' (Fantini, 2009). According to a complete definition, intercultural competence is the capacity to successfully navigate cultural differences and effectively use practical communication skills to accept the diverse identities of people in their surroundings (Chen & Starosta, 1996).

Food items are considered the most culturally sensitive since patterns, national tastes, and preferences differ significantly (Whitelock & Pimblett, 1997). The National AAEA Research Priority 7: Addressing Complex Problems guided this activity (Roberts et al., 2016). This priority area underscores informal learning beyond the classroom to develop contextual understanding (Roberts et al., 2016). This cross-cultural non-formal learning activity aimed to increase cultural awareness and enhance intercultural competency among domestic and international agricultural students from the United States, Ghana, and Nigeria by connecting them through discussions about food items and commodities. The objective of this innovative activity was to: (a) identify the different food items and commodities each person was most familiar; (b) identify differences and similarities in these food items; and (c) identify how students access and utilize commodities in their "home" regions.

How it works

The idea for this activity came from a discussion about food items between an international graduate student and her advisor. This conversation made them realize the cultural differences between international and domestic graduate students and how to use a shopping experience to foster cultural awareness. This project was designed to create an experiential learning opportunity for students and deepen relationships between international and domestic students.

Participation was voluntary, and all on-campus graduate students (18 total) received an email invitation overviewing the goal of the activity. Eight students expressed interest and availability based on recruiting emails, and six participated in the actual experience. Three participants were international students, two students from Ghana and one from Nigeria, and three domestic students all from different states (Arkansas, Georgia, & Texas) participated. A supermarket, with a variety of food items, was selected. The experiential learning activity included a worksheet completed before the supermarket visit, an icebreaker at the start of the activity, a worksheet to guide participants, and written reflection questions completed at the end of the activity.

The pre-worksheet sought to capture information about common food items accessed in participant's home locations, products used weekly, types of food prepared with the food items, and food preservation techniques used. During the one hour and thirty minute supermarket activity, participants completed an icebreaker and the first question on the worksheet together. One adjustment was made as all participants visited the fresh, alternative, and dried milk sections

together. This adjustment was made as the facilitators recognized hesitation among participants about the process. This ensured everyone understood the process, since people would be in different locations and would not have access to the facilitators to ask questions. Next, an international student was randomly paired with a domestic student, and went through the rest of the activity by visiting each section of store for the food items listed in the worksheet (eggs, maize, beans, rice, fruit, vegetables). In the end, participants gathered and debriefed about their overall experiences. This was participant driven and sparked conversations about food similarities, differences, and what participants learned from their peers. The final part was a post worksheet to collect thoughts about what was learned, feelings about interacting with others and discussion about their “home” food products, and perceptions about cultural food considerations.

Results to date

This was completed one time with six students, three domestic and three international students during the second month of fall semester courses. Based on the worksheet designed to collect informal feedback on the experience; overall, domestic and international students recorded a positive experience and enjoyed the ability to talk about food not only because of their involvement in agriculture but because it is a universal topic (Whitelock & Pimblett, 1997). One participant stated he liked to learn about different cultures through food and it made him appreciate other different foods and their storage method. One student reported, “it opened my mind to think about the differences in how food production exists in different countries”. Another stated it was a great experience that exposed him to the uniqueness of different cultures and how similar food items are uniquely processed and consumed in different cultures. The facilitators of the activity have observed a shift from formal role-defined relationships (formal peer-to-peer interactions) to more relaxed and friendship-based interactions between the participants.

Future plans/advice to others

It is advised that faculty include intercultural learning opportunities, beyond the classroom, and work to foster and strengthen relationships between international and domestic students as the number of international students studying in the United States rises. The facilitators suggest experiential activities that bring students together around shared but unique experiences, like food. Additionally, the facilitators plan to repeat this activity with new international and domestic students because it fostered relationships beyond professional and academic responsibilities.

Costs/resources needed

Financially, there was not expense for this activity. The major resource investments were the activity plan and the worksheets developed to get people to fully engage in the experience. The total time spent was one hour and a half in the store doing the whole process and three hours developing the activity and recruiting participants. The facilitators provided copies of the worksheets, pencils, and clipboards to improve ease during the experience. A faculty member provided a ride for students, if needed, due to university transportation being time intensive for off-campus locations. A supermarket that offers a wide variety of food items is beneficial.

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