

Implementing the Intercultural Conflict Style Inventory in the Undergraduate Agricultural Education Curriculum

Mr. Joe Ramstad

Iowa State University
227 Curtiss Hall
Ames, IA 50011
651-280-0214
ramstad@iastate.edu

Dr. Scott Smalley

Iowa State University
217 Curtiss Hall
Ames, IA 50011
515-294-0047
smalle16@iastate.edu

Implementing the Intercultural Conflict Style Inventory in the Undergraduate Agricultural Education Curriculum

Introduction and Need for Idea

Navigating conflict is cited as one of the top fears, both among students working in teams, along with adults in the workplace (Brown & Jarldorn, 2023; Mahon, 2009). Each individual has unique communication styles, along with strategies for how they approach and manage conflict; this presents a variety of opportunities, and also challenges. This fear is complicated even further when cultural and personality differences are also at play (Kim et al., 2015; Mahon, 2009). In the AFNR industry specifically, we consistently must lead across cultural differences with stakeholders within our industry, and consumers alike; there is not a shortage in the number of opinions, ideas, and perspectives that shape our perceptions and our beliefs of the agricultural industry, and this influences how we go about communicating and leading across differences. Therefore, working effectively in a team setting while also navigating conflict is a critical skill that must be developed, and healthy conversations and experiences about how to effectively manage conflict should be had at all levels: in secondary education, in post-secondary education, and even for professionals in the workforce.

Team dynamics have been investigated for many years, and many models include healthy conflict as a key component of the teamwork process (Brown & Jarldorn, 2023; Hammer, 2005). One example of this is Tuckman's model of group development, which includes conflict, or "storming," as the second key stage in developing an effective team: 1) forming, 2) storming, 3) norming, 4) performing, and 5) adjourning (Brown & Jarldorn, 2023). Having the skill to navigate the highs and lows of working on a team is essential to achieving success and accomplishing the needed tasks in a productive and healthy manner.

The Intercultural Conflict Style (ICS) instrument consists of a series of 18 unique items that seek to understand the respondent's preferred ways of communicating their ideas when they find themselves in difficult situations or navigating conflict. For each of the 18 items, respondents are presented with 2 statements; respondents evaluate the statements using a point system, allocating a total of up to 7 points to both statements for each item. For example, in item 1 of the inventory, when evaluating how they prefer to resolve conflict, they could give a rating of 2 to "talk to someone in authority" and a rating of 5 to "talk to a friend." Higher scores indicate a stronger preference toward that particular strategy (ICS Inventory, LLC, 2022). After completing the instrument, results are tabulated, and respondents are plotted in two different continuums: 1) direct vs. indirect communication and 2) emotional restraint vs. emotional expressiveness. Depending on their placement in both of these continuums, they are assigned a intercultural conflict style: 1) discussion (direct communication, emotional restraint), 2) engagement (direct communication, emotional expressiveness), 3) accommodation (indirect communication, emotional restraint), or 4) dynamic (indirect communication, emotional expressiveness).

Since discovering how to lead across both cultural and communication differences is essential for the agriculture industry and in everyone's daily lives, this idea consists of administering the ICS inventory to undergraduate agricultural education students as a way for them to assess their own intercultural conflict strategy. It is a cost-effective and impactful way to help learners reflect upon their communication and conflict strategies so they are effective leaders in a variety of settings. Implementation is needed within our classrooms and workplaces—for students and educators alike—if we wish to have positive industry contributions today and in the future.

Methodology

A convenience sample of 41 undergraduate students within Iowa State University's Agricultural Education and Studies Department completed the ICS inventory online. The inventories were purchased, and students were provided instructions on how to access and complete their inventory. Of the 41 participants, student backgrounds included 10 males and 31 females and representation from the sophomore, junior, and senior classes. Additionally, the ICS inventory facilitators were each provided with a copy of the inventory, interpretive guide and facilitator manual and became familiar with how to leverage this learning experience for students. Students were given results and time to reflect on results with one another and the ICS facilitator.

Results and Implications

As a result of completing the ICS inventory, students reported that they gained invaluable insight as to their own cultural conflict style, and they recognized that their personal discoveries as a result of the ICS can be used in a variety of applications. The ICS experience resulted in students achieving a deeper understanding of their own intercultural communication and conflict resolution skills, along with key strategies on how to lead across differences throughout their undergraduate experiences and beyond. This information assisted them in both small and large tasks, ranging from how to approach conflict in team projects as part of classes, navigating challenges as part of student organizations, and ultimately, the strengths and areas for development that are most commonly present within their own intercultural conflict style.

Future Plans and Advice

Future undergraduate students within the Iowa State University Agricultural Education and Studies Department will be encouraged to complete the ICS as part of their engagement in a course. Integrating this experience into a freshman seminar course or orientation course might serve as an opportunity for students to get to know one another but also open the door to powerful conversations about topics surrounding culture, leadership, and social awareness—and personal perspectives related to these topics. This experience can assist students in navigating social or cultural barriers they may encounter in their undergraduate experience and into their personal and professional lives outside of the classroom. Prior to taking the assessment, it is essential to remind students that this experience is most meaningful and accurate if it is taken seriously and honestly. Likewise, when having conversations with students as they interpret and understand their individual results, it can be helpful to remind students that this inventory is only a tool and that being aware of the results allows us to have an opportunity to grow and develop ourselves as leaders (Hammer, 2009; ICS Inventory, LLC, 2022). Having one-on-one conversations with students who wish to explore their results on a deeper level can also be a powerful strategy to guide students in their ability to apply their results to their own lives or their own lived experiences in a more personalized way (Hammer, 2009).

Costs and Resources

When used in an educational context, the cost for the online version of the ICS is dependent on the quantity purchased. A single ICS costs \$16, but those purchasing over 100 at a time receive discounts of up to \$2 per ICS (ICS Inventory, LLC, 2024). Paper versions of the ICS maintain a similar cost but require the inclusion of shipping costs and can only be purchased in multiples of 5. With the importance of intercultural communication in today's society, obtaining grants or funding to provide undergraduates with the ICS experience is something worth exploring. Some funding sources may include the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) grants or potentially grants that are offered within one's own state or post-secondary institution.

References

- Brown, M., & Jarldorn, M. (2023). Overcoming fear of conflict in group work: Reflections from practice and teaching. *Social Work with Groups*, 47(1), 79–94. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01609513.2023.2220115>
- Hammer, M. R. (2005). The Intercultural Conflict Style Inventory: A conceptual framework and measure of intercultural conflict resolution approaches. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 29, 675–695. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2005.08.010>
- Hammer, M. R. (2009). Solving problems and resolving conflict using the Intercultural Conflict Style model and inventory. In M. A. Moodian (Ed.), *Contemporary leadership and intercultural competence: Exploring the cross-cultural dynamics within organizations* (pp. 219–232). SAGE Publications.
- ICS Inventory, LLC. (2022). *ICS interpretive guide*. ICS Inventory, LLC.
- ICS Inventory, LLC. (2024). *ICS pricing*. Intercultural Conflict Style Inventory. Retrieved May 2, 2024, from <https://icsinventory.com/ICS-pricing>
- Kim, E. J., Yamaguchi, A., Kim, M.-S., & Miyahara, A. (2015). Effects of taking conflict personally on conflict management styles across cultures. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 72, 143–149. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2014.08.004>
- Mahon, J. (2009). Conflict style and cultural understanding among teachers in the western United States: Exploring relationships. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 33, 46–56. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2008.12.002>