The Unbearably Lightness of Being Intercultural

By Patrick Schmidt

Globalization is rapidly breaking down our vision of a world with well-defined national, cultural and linguistic boundaries. Cheap computers and internet service, and innovations like *Google, YouTube* and *Wikipedia* are enabling a constant flow of knowledge and ideas across borders. This, along with the emergence of faster and cheaper transportation, has meant even the most remote parts of the planet are brought into instantaneous contact with one another.

Marshall McCluhan's "global village" has, in this sense, become reality.

Not surprisingly, intercultural competence has taken on an importance that no one could have imagined even 20 years ago. We've shifted into a new mode of living where transnational contact is almost a daily occurrence. Our lives are enriched but are also far more complex.

The very nature of [cross-cultural] communication--different languages, behavior patterns and values--makes it imperative to avoid assumptions of similarity and to stimulate appreciation of intrinsic differences. Thus, intercultural skill (the ability to understand the values and beliefs behind behavior and reconcile them with your own) are basic, necessary toolsculture in today's world.

It's not something that happens overnight! Usually it means living in another country/culture/language for several years and, even then, one has to be both observant and open-minded. But globalization has no time for that...

Whether it's the economy, the ecology, or just plain international politics, the world can't seem to wait. Administrators and salesmen, diplomats and artists and aid-workers race around the globe like the human ants in a Jacques Tati film.

Our job, as intercultural trainers, is to telescope the process, to explain the fundamentals of social communication while relating the "charming idiosyncrasies" of a specific society. But how do we know we're getting through? How do we recognize the beginnings of intercultural competence in our students?

A good place to start is *complex allegiance*, where a person's identity becomes less fixed. Thoughts and emotions are less a product of previous beliefs than an on-going process of understanding. Sense of self moves in and out of different world-views; one no longer thinks in ethnocentric terms but according to ambiguous conditions, a natural juggling of value-systems.

Arnold Schwarzenegger is an excellent example of what I call "bicultural belonging". When visiting *die Heimat*, he's as Austrian as it gets. But when he returns to California, he's *home*...

A truly intercultural person speaks more than one language and knows that language is far more than a means of communication--not so much a system of vocabulary, grammar and syntax as a shared perception of the world. Experience and meaning are connected via a shared framework and each new linguistic reality teaches you more about yourself.

The intercultural person is able to see and feel the relativity of beliefs, of decisions: an "absolute standard of rightness" no longer exists. Instead the process is dynamic, a continuing awareness of your own cultural boundaries. Which, in turn, allows you to expand your own parameters and wander into another person's mind.

Take the well-adjusted American manager of a U.S.-German pharmaceutical company outside of Frankfurt. He wants to develop a new marketing campaign on a trial-and-error basis but knows his team will feel insecure about it. Understanding that the German need to plan things out is real, not frivolous, he comes up with a reassuring analogy.

"It's not a hit-or-miss operation, quite the contrary. What we're doing is running a loop in a flow-chart on daily sales and will adapt the campaign accordingly."

This "other" perspective builds on empathy and permits events to be reconstructed as alternative cultural experiences. However, the ability to see oneself according to dual frames of reference--a sort of "dynamic in-between-ness"--can cause some to lose their primary cultural identity and create what might be described as internal culture shock.

The breakdown of identity leads to *cultural marginality*, an existence on the periphery of two (or more) cultures. Milan Kundera's "unbearable lightness of being" takes on real meaning here. If each life is ultimately insignificant, the decisions you make, whether based on your own culture or an adopted one, don't matter: they have no weight, they don't tie you down.

But insignificance is unbearable. When our decisions lose their importance, our lives are set adrift. We no longer exist as clearly-defined individuals. It's a common condition among long-term expatriates and "global nomads." Conflicting identities often lead them to seek out other cultural marginals rather than people belonging to a specific group.

Despite periodic identity-confusion and the "unbearable lightness" of an uprooted life, such people may find roles as *global mediators*. The attempt to understand and reconcile cultural differences in both perception and expression is a worthy personal goal as well as a viable career opportunity.

Slipping in and out of multiple frames of references is a characteristic of intercultural sensitivity.

In any case, one's true values are never at risk--a degree of ethnocentrism remains in fundamental habits of mind which co-exist with "other-culture awareness." Every person needs a healthy identity-based ego and tested approaches to life.

We are, however, being forced to move from a "nationalistic worldview" to the universal recognition that each culture is unique and must be accepted for what it is before any real communication is possible.