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# The Use of Cultural Maps in Developing Intercultural Sensitivity: From Culture-Centrism to Culture-Relativism

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## Abstract

The paper describes an experience of teaching intercultural communications to undergraduate students using a cultural mapping method. Students were asked to draw cultural-specific maps that reflected their own idea of the world and then to compare them with similar maps drawn by people from different countries. In the process of drawing, presenting, comparing and discussing the maps, students were forced to confront their own cultural preconceptions as well as to become aware of the extent to which their picture of the world is culturally determined.

**Keywords:** intercultural communications, intercultural sensitivity, cultural maps, pedagogy, cultural relativism

## 1. Introduction

I would like to focus this article on the cultural maps that I have been doing with students majoring in Cultural Studies, Intercultural Communication Studies and Leisure Studies at the Department of Art History and Cultural Studies of the Ural Federal University named after the first President of Russia B. N. Yeltsin (Ekaterinburg, Russia) over the past 15 years. It was an assignment that started out as an exercise that was designed to help the students grasp Edward Hall's concept of unique "cultural glasses" [3–5] and facilitate them to take off the lenses of their culture and try on different optics to understand how they shape our perceptions of the world. It developed into one of the really valuable tools that teaches students what cultural relativism is and, thus, becomes their first and most difficult step towards cultural relativism by boosting their ability to self-reflect and practicing their theoretical concepts in real-life situations.

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## 2. Methods

This research is based on a combination of different qualitative and quantitative methods which have been applied to maps produced by my students as part of their homework assignment, as well as to students in class when they were presenting their maps to each other and to other groups. The research is based on extensive data – approximately 300 maps that were drawn, painted or composed in a collage technique by students majoring in Cultural Studies, Intercultural Communication Studies and Leisure Studies. Classwork has consisted of the following methods: focus groups, observation, participant observation and interviews that provided me with an opportunity to collect qualitative data including students' own explanations and reasoning for structuring maps and selecting the associations or stereotypes which they used in their maps of the world today.

## 3. Analysis

We know that intercultural sensitivity is one of the three dimensions of intercultural communication competence which is "conceptualized as an individual's ability to achieve their communication goal while effectively and appropriately utilizing communication behaviors to negotiate between the different identities present within a culturally diverse environment" [6, p. 21]. The first dimension is intercultural awareness (cognitive aspect), the second – intercultural sensitivity (affective aspect), and the third one is intercultural effectiveness (the behavioral aspect)" [1].

Originally, the idea behind this assignment was to demonstrate to the students how dominant our culture is in determining the way we see the world around us and to help them step aside from their own culture-centered worldview and into a more open and globally flexible one. Edward Hall's concept of "cultural glasses" was intuitively clear to them on a theoretical level but taking it to the next levels – emotional (affective aspect) and behavioral – proved to be much more challenging.

Edward Hall defined culture as "those deep, common, unstated experiences which member of a given culture share, communicate without knowing, and which form the backdrop against which all other events are judged". [2, p. x] It was exactly this inability to separate ourselves from these culture-tinted glasses that I wanted to get across to my students in a more practical setting.

First, I asked my students to make a map that would reflect their view of the world today. They had to complete this assignment without consulting a physical map of the

world as it was crucial that they would not use any blueprint or a prompt to remind them about the geographical or political structure of the world. They were allowed to draw, paint or make a collage using associations that first came to their minds when they thought about these places or which represented them best. I told them that this is a "cultural map" implying that I don't expect it to be geographically or politically accurate, but that it needed to portray their worldview and reflect their own ideas about how they imagine the world today.

Second, the next time in class I broke them into groups, and they were given an assignment to present their maps to their partners inside the group and explain every-thing they had drawn. Their group work was focused around presenting, explaining, comparing and contrasting their maps with the other ones within the group. Afterwards, they were asked to decide if their individual maps could have been merged into one map representing common associations and ideas that could be called their cultural group map.

Finally, having presented their maps to each other within the group and later having done similar presentations to other groups, we moved to the discussion about what kind of cultural map they could have produced using all of their maps and what structure and content it would have included. Also, I tried to make them reflect upon how people from other countries might have interpreted their worldview and why.

After we finished discussing their cultural maps, I handed out cultural maps drawn by the students from other countries and asked them to analyze their structure and content and in what way these maps were different from theirs. They also presented these maps to other groups and discussed how they were different between each other and contrasted against their own maps. It opened a completely new perspective to them and then we finalized all our reflections by checking what the geographical maps made in other countries look like.

## 4. Discussion

The idea of conceptualizing and producing a cultural map turned out to be really interesting and stimulating, as it helped my students to think about their vision of the world and how their perceptions are dictated by the cultural glasses. It also made them realize how inseparable these culture-tinted lenses are from us – we cannot see the world without them and so the others cannot do that just the same, that is why there is nothing surprising when each of us considers his vision to be the most accurate and objective.

My students started out this assignment with a belief that all people around the world, if asked, would draw a similar kind of map in structure with maybe a little difference in content. They also were confident that their associations and ideas characterizing their perceptions of the world around us were typical and universally shared by people from other countries too.

So how refreshing it was for me to observe their confusion and misunderstanding when working with cultural maps produced by foreign students. They accused them of making the maps "the wrong way" or "not having a clue how to draw a map" or being overly "culture-centric and focused only on their own culture". They could accept the fact the associations and ideas would differ from one country to another, but the structure had to be the same. I could understand from their group discussions and presentations how the idea of cultural diversity and culture-determined worldview slowly emerged in their minds.

The last stage was the use of physical maps made in different countries (for example Australia, USA, China, France etc.) that actually proved that people in other countries even draw the maps differently, placing their own country in the center of their world – the most challenging was the map from Australia which was upside down and looked completely incoherent to them as it also was reversed. The physical maps filled in the blanks and demonstrated a variety of countries that portrayed their maps in a "wrong way" only because it didn't match our way.

## 5. Conclusions

In conclusion, we can say that using cultural maps as effective tools for fostering intercultural sensitivity my students learnt that a map always follows the logic of culture – it is only natural to put themselves in the center of the map and visually extend and blow up the geographical borders of their native country/city/region. Furthermore, we can always identify two more structural layers of the map – the inside layer where we place the countries/cities/regions that have historical and important ties with our native country, while the outside layer includes those countries/cities/regions that we know very little or nothing about because of the lack of mutual history or intercultural connections.

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