

# *Intercultural Collaborative Learning: Using Role-Play as a Tool*

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**Abstract.** *This study examines the nature of intercultural collaborative learning. The concept of intercultural collaborative learning involves two types of learning: intercultural learning and collaborative learning. Intercultural learning generally refers to understanding different cultures by subscribing to a philosophy of cultural relativism. Collaborative learning is characterized by cooperating creatively with others in an atmosphere filled with mutual esteem; effective communication; successful utilization of fellow students as resources; an equitable division of labor; divergent and daring thinking; a high degree of interaction; mutual trust, influence, acceptance and support; emotional involvement; and coordination of effort. In this study, cross-cultural training using role-play is analyzed from the point of view of activity theory. Through this analysis, role-play is found to be a useful tool to promote intercultural collaborative learning in effective and creative ways. Intercultural collaborative learning may help to build a multicultural symbiotic community to foster creative and innovative activity in the global village.*

**Keywords:** *Intercultural learning, collaborative learning, cross-cultural training, role play, activity theory, multicultural symbiotic community*

## **Introduction**

In today's world, an individual can easily relocate to a new culture, thanks to advanced development of transportation technology and international relations. For example, the number of individuals from different cultures, such as Chinese and Brazilians, has been increasing in Japan. This trend is expected to continue. Consequently, Japanese citizens will frequently come into contact with those from different countries while moving about in local communities, such as neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces.

Human beings have successfully enlarged their scope of activity beyond cultural boundaries, but have not increased their knowledge of how to communicate effectively with those from different cultures. Communication is considered to be “effective to the extent that we are able to minimize misunderstandings” (Gudykunst, 2004, p.28). In order to minimize misunderstandings in interaction with people from different cultures, individuals must understand different ways of thinking and behaving. Intercultural collaborative learning is examined here as a useful method for understanding different ways of thinking and behaving.

### **Intercultural Collaborative Learning**

The concept of intercultural collaborative learning is composed of two different types of learning: intercultural learning and collaborative learning. Although intercultural collaborative learning generally refers to learning about different cultures through creative collaboration, it is necessary to look at the both types of learning, respectively, in order to fully understand the concept.

#### ***Intercultural Learning***

Learning about different cultures—for instance, about different ways of thinking and behaving—can give us an opportunity to grow. For example, Ting-Toomey (1999) points out that:

It is through the mirror of others that we learn to know ourselves. It is though facing our own discomfort and anxiety that we learn to stretch and grow. Encountering a dissimilar other helps us to question our routine way of thinking and behaving. Getting to *really know* a dissimilar stranger helps us to glimpse into another world—a range of unfamiliar experiences and a set of values unlike our own. (p. 8)

When learning different cultures, it is crucial to subscribe in some degree to cultural relativism as the basis of learning. Cultural relativism refers to “a philosophy which, in recognizing the values set up by every society to guide its own life, lays stress on the dignity in every body of custom, and on the need for tolerance of conventions through they may differ from one’s own” (Herskovits, 1950, p. 76). Cultural relativism leads us to understand the ways those from dissimilar cultures might think and behave in the context of their own cultures. Thus, we can deeply understand their ways of thinking and behaving only when our learning is based in some degree on cultural relativism.

The opposite of cultural relativism is ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism refers to “the view of things in which one’s own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it” (Sumner, 1940, p. 13). Gudykunst (2004) indicates that:

We can think about ethnocentrism as the tendency to interpret and evaluate strangers' behavior using our own standards. This tendency is natural and unavoidable. Everyone is ethnocentric to some degree. It is possible to have a low degree of ethnocentrism, but it is impossible to be nonethnocentric. (p. 131)

Because ethnocentrism leads us to view our ways of thinking and behaving as the natural and right ones, it prevents us from truly understanding different cultures. Thus, intercultural learning must be based in cultural relativism rather than in ethnocentrism.

Generally, there are three stages of intercultural learning. In the first stage, we increase our understanding of different ways of thinking and behaving. In the second stage, we increase our understandings of our own ways of thinking and behaving by comparing them with these new, different ways of thinking and behaving. In the third stage, we can potentially create new ways of thinking and behaving. As a result, the process of intercultural learning is associated closely with intercultural activity. Intercultural activity refers to the hybrid process of observing, comparing, and creating different cultural practices (Teräs, 2007). Examining human practices measures them in terms of activity (Leont'ev, 1981). Thus, intercultural learning can be examined from the point of view of intercultural activity.

### **Collaborative Learning**

Collaborative learning differs from traditional learning. Ligorio and Van Veen (2006) point out that all agents in a learning situation, whether students, teachers, or experts, are expected to learn actively and explicitly from each other. They further point out that each agent learns not only by simply exchanging information, but through accommodating information and other agents' points of view. The core elements of a collaborative learning structure are (1) a group goal and (2) a system of rewarding group members based on group performance (Oakes, 1985).

There are many advantages in collaborative learning, as shown by previous research. Usluata (1997) summarizes these advantages as follows: (1) learners are motivated to interact with one another as learning resources; (2) learners are required to accommodate each others' differences in the process of learning; (3) learners can test ideas developed in the group; and (4) learners can develop feelings of self-worth, acceptance, achievement, and faith in the future.

In general, achievement is higher in collaborative learning than in individual learning, and efforts to collaborate with others, in comparison to individual efforts, result in more frequent use of higher-level reasoning strategies, more frequent process gain, and higher performance on subsequent tests taken individually (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Because the process of collaborative

learning is based on direct communication with others, its outcome tends to be more creative than that of individual learning. However, it is important to create an environment that will support collaborative learning with mutual esteem; effective communication; successful utilization of fellow students as resources; an equitable division of labor; divergent and daring thinking; a high degree of interaction; mutual trust, influence, acceptance and support; emotional involvement; and coordination of effort (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Without an environment that will support these conditions, collaborative learning may not produce an effective or creative outcome in comparison to individual learning.

Given the necessary conditions of collaborative learning listed above, it can be considered to be a process of learning with social support. Kahn and Antonucci (1980) regard social support as interpersonal transactions that include at least one of three elements: affect, affirmation, or aid. According to Caplan (1974, 1976), social support is considered to be a relationship between an individual and a group that enhances emotional mastery, offers guidance, and provides feedback to the individual about his or her identity and performance. The learning process can produce stress in a student. Because support networks can provide assistance to a person dealing with stress, social support may be helpful to students dealing with stress. Thus, collaborative learning that provides social support within the learning situation generally is more effective than individual learning lacking this support.

### **Cross-Cultural Training**

Cross-cultural training is carried out mainly for businesspersons who cross cultural boundaries. Various types of cross-cultural training have been created. However, the general purpose of conducting cross-cultural training is to facilitate the participants' understanding of a different culture, in order to communicate effectively in the target culture.

Much cross-cultural training is organized around three major areas: content, objectives, and methods. Content refers the training's focus on either general or specific elements of the culture in question, while objectives describes the training's aims in terms of cognitive goals, affective goals, or behavioral goals for participants (Bennett, 1986). Methods used will determine whether training requires participants to be involved actively (high-level participation), moderately (medium-level participation), or minimally (low-level participation) (Brislin, 1989). For example, a cross-cultural training conducted for businesspersons who are sent to the branch office in the United States from the head office in Japan might be organized by focusing on specific features of US culture, by proposing behavioral goals, and by requiring high-level participation.

As the world has become transformed into a global village, the need for cross-cultural training sessions has increased. Today, target participants are not

only businesspersons who frequently cross cultural boundaries, but also ordinary persons who generally stay in their local communities. The major purpose for conducting cross-cultural training in the global village is to encourage participants to be ethical transcultural communicators. Five characteristics of the ethical transcultural communicator are named by Ting-Toomey (1999). An ethical transcultural communicator:

1. Respects people of diverse cultures and groups on the basis of equality.
2. Is willing to engage in a lifelong learning process of culture-universal and culture-specific communication knowledge.
3. Is willing to make mindful choices in response to the various situational contingencies of problematic cultural practices.
4. Is willing to assume a social commitment to work for mindful change so as to create a morally inclusive society.
5. Is willing to uphold the human dignity of others via a respectful mindset, an open heart, inclusive visions through ethnorelative lenses, and practicing mindful transcultural communication competencies. (p. 276)

It is important to educate members of the global village as ethical transcultural communicators, in order to avoid conflicts based on cultural differences.

### **Role-Play**

Role-play is a type of play. Play is a useful tool for learning, and it is used not only for children, but also for adults. In play, we can enhance our daily performance (Vygotsky, 1978). Communication is an essential element in play, and it promotes a sense of community and fellowship among those who play (Mearns, 2005). Learning by playing is active, fun, and associated with the creation of meaning through communication with other participants, as well as through the process of self-reflection and personal transformation (Melamed, 1987).

Role-play refers to “a dynamic artificial environment in which human ‘agents’ interact by playing roles with semi-defined characteristics, objectives and relations (social rules) to one another and within a specified scenario (set of conditions)” (Linser, Ree-Lindstad, & Vold, 2007, p. 2). We can learn to appreciate our thoughts and feelings by playing the role of another (Mead, 1934). Participants in role-play are required to look carefully at the situation in which their characters are placed (Kaufman, 1998; Mandel, 1977; Robinson, Anderson, Hermann, & Snyder, 1966).

By participating in role-play, group members can practice communication with others, learn to empathize with others by imagining themselves as different characters, and express themselves in a supportive environment (Shepard, 2002). According to Monk (1978), empathy and engagement with different viewpoints are the most significant outcomes of learning through role-play.

Empathy is an important element in communicating competently. Bell (1987) describes three aspects of empathy as cognitive, affective, and communicative:

Cognitively, the empathic person takes the perspective of another person, and in so doing strives to see the world from the other's point of view. Affectively, the empathic person experiences the emotions of another; he or she feels the other's experiences. Communicatively, the empathic individual signals understanding and concern through verbal and nonverbal cues. (p. 204)

Therefore, participants in role-play can learn to be empathic towards others, which is an important skill for human communication.

Kraus (2008) argues that role-play

promotes a deeper, as opposed to surface, learning. Deep learning occurs when students are motivated to learn about a particular subject, are involved in some form of activity during which they can experience the subject, and interact with others (typically classmates). (p. 132)

Because role-play helps participants to learn a particular subject deeply, it has been used as an instructional tool in a number of fields, such as counseling, law, nursing, and education (DeNerve & Mary, 1997; Schearer & Davidhizar, 2003).

### **An Analysis: Using Role-Play as a Tool for Intercultural Collaborative Learning in Cross-Cultural Training**

A cross-cultural training was conducted by the author on July 20, 2008 in Shizuoka, Japan.<sup>1</sup> There were two purposes for conducting the training: one purpose was to facilitate participants' understanding of different cultures, whereas the other purpose was to see, by recruiting real participants, whether or not the training developed by the trainer would be effective. The training was of three hours duration. Because the training uses role-play as a tool to facilitate participants' understanding of different cultures, it is analyzed here as an example of intercultural collaborative learning.

#### ***Participants (Agents)***

There were three types of participants in the cross-cultural training incorporating intercultural collaborative learning:

- 1 Twenty-four Japanese adults living in Shizuoka
- 2 Five international students at a university in Shizuoka (They were from Northern and Southern parts of China, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Sri Lanka, respectively) and an American adult who teaches English at

- a senior high school in Shizuoka
- 3 A trainer (the author)

A total of thirty-one persons participated as agents in the training, which used role-play as its primary tool for intercultural collaborative learning.

### ***Procedures for Conducting the Role-Play***

The role-play consisted of six steps:

- 1 The 24 Japanese agents were divided into six groups. Each group was composed of one foreign participant and five Japanese participants. The trainer did not belong to any specific group.
- 2 Each group was told they were to be a family living in the foreign participant's culture, and each person in the group was cast in the role of a family member, such as grandmother, grandfather, mother, father, son, or daughter.
- 3 Each group wrote a script for the role-play, led by the foreign agent. The script was to describe activities such as planning for a family trip, having a dinner at home, or celebrating the grandmother's birthday. The duration of the role-play was approximately 10 minutes.
- 4 Each group rehearsed the role-play.
- 5 Each group performed the role-play in turn.
- 6 After the role-plays, discussion was conducted utilizing "why" types of questions; for instance, a question may ask, "Why does the Chinese mother behave in that way?"

### ***Analysis***

In general, all participants were deeply involved and experienced a huge amount of pleasure while learning, as the trainer's observations and participants' reports show. While using role-play as a method of intercultural collaborative learning, the trainer intervened within each group by facilitating discussion when it was not flowing smoothly. However, the trainer participated in the activity not only as a leader, but also as a learner. Specifically, the trainer learned about different cultures by listening to the discussions within each group and communicating directly with each participant in the process of developing the role-play.

The foreign agents participated in the activity mainly to inform the Japanese participants about their cultures, and they appeared to enjoy doing so. One reason for this may be that they rarely have such opportunities to explain their cultures in detail to Japanese people. While they were explaining their cultures, the Japanese participants asked them a lot of questions. They also seemed to learn about Japanese culture during discussion. Thus, the foreign participants and Japanese participants experienced both teaching and learning from with each other in this activity.



At the end of the session, open-ended questionnaires were used to record participants' reactions to being involved in role-play intended to facilitate intercultural collaborative learning. Overall, reactions to this type of cross-cultural training were positive. The participants reported that they learned about another culture, as well as about new ways of interacting with people from that culture. The participants appreciated collaborating with others. Some of the comments about role-play-facilitated intercultural collaborative learning are recorded below, translated from the original Japanese:

"I discovered many new facts by interacting directly with a foreigner through role-play."

"I felt close not only to other Japanese members but also to a foreigner through the role-play."

"I learned a lot about Sri Lankan culture through the role-play, such as how members of the family will interact with each other."

"I learned that the ways that family members interact with each other differ across cultures."

"I learned that it is important to communicate directly with a foreigner in order to understand his/her culture."

"I believe that we can prepare for real intercultural interaction by doing this activity."

"Today's activity made me realize that foreigners living in Japanese society might be experiencing difficulties because of cultural differences."

"I appreciate the opportunity to learn about different cultures in this way. Today's training was very interesting, and I learned a lot."

These comments indicate that role-play-facilitated intercultural collaborative learning is successful, because it enables participants to construct their own knowledge, it challenges them to be active in learning, and it is experienced as supportive of their learning.

Wood and O'Malley (1996) emphasize that it is crucial to pay attention to the effects of social interaction in a collaborative activity, as well as to the learning results for the participants. Engeström (1987) presents a general model of human activity reflecting its collaborative nature. The model shows that an individual engages in object-oriented activity using mediating artifacts (tools), and that rules, community, and division of labor are important factors when collaborating with others who share a common objective. The mediation of in-



tercultural collaborative learning by role-play is analyzed based on this model (see FIGURE 1).

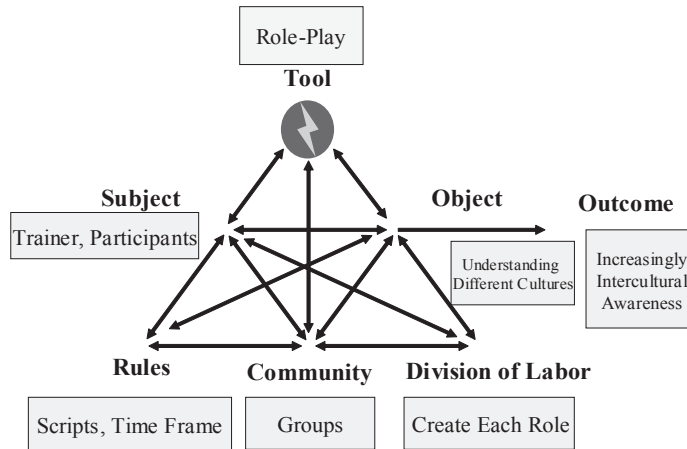


FIGURE 1 Activity system of cross-cultural training using role-play

As shown in the figure, the trainer and participants are involved in intercultural learning through the use of role-play. Rules for the activity consist of the scripts and the time frame of the training, community refers to the groups, or “families,” and division of labor is allocated according to the creation of each role in the family. All agents of the activity originally seem to be highly motivated to learn different cultures. In addition, because each participant—excluding the trainer—is required to perform their part in the role-play in front of others, he or she is very highly motivated to learn about his or her role. This indicates that the central tool of the activity—role-play—can provide a community (in this case, each group) extra motivation for participating in the activity: intercultural learning.

### Conclusion: Building Multicultural Symbiotic Communities

As the analysis shows, role-play functions as a useful tool in facilitating intercultural collaborative learning. Because role-play is a fun activity, it leads participants to involve themselves in creative collaboration. Takamizawa (1989) suggests that stimulating positive emotions, like pleasure, would increase effectiveness of learning a foreign language. Thus, adopting a tool that can stimulate positive emotions is useful when designing effective and creative intercultural collaborative learning.

The potential and ultimate outcome of this type of intercultural collaborative learning may be the development of multicultural symbiotic communities within the global village. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the

world is getting smaller and smaller, and traditional systems of human activity, formerly based on cultural/ethnic homogeneity, are now filled with apparent contradictions. As a result, traditional systems based on cultural and ethnic homogeneity are forced by these contradictions to shift to an innovative practice that will allow cultural and ethnic heterogeneity. In homogeneous systems of communities, cultural/ethnic minorities are required to respect the cultural/ethnic mainstream and to assimilate themselves to the mainstream, while both minorities and mainstream societal members are expected to respect each other and learn from each other within heterogeneous systems of communities. This shift is crucial to avoid possible conflicts between cultural/ethnic minorities and the mainstream. Thus, the world currently needs intercultural collaborative learning that can promote this shift.

Friedman (1983) suggests that there generally are two types of communities: communities of affinity and communities of otherness. A community of affinity refers to a group of similar-minded individuals. Members of such a community value the safety of using of a similar language and the same slogans. However, they do not have close relationships with each other. On the other hand, a community of otherness is based on the assumption that each member has a way of doing things that is dissimilar from those of others but that contributes to the group. Although members of the community are not alike, they share common concerns. Therefore, a community of otherness is associated closely with the concept of a multicultural symbiotic community based on heterogeneity.

Because a community of otherness is formed by dissimilar individuals who share common concerns, it may be associated with the activity system based on “knotworking.” According to Engeström (2005), knotworking exists as the “rapidly pulsating, distributed, and partially improvised orchestration of collaborative performance between otherwise loosely connected actors and organization units” (pp. 316-317). Yamazumi (2007) suggests that dissimilar individuals “seek innovation by collaboration across traditional boundaries” (p. 28). Consequently, if the motivation for dissimilar individuals to form a community is based on the desire for innovation, there will result an association between a community of otherness and knotworking.

Gudykunst (2004) summarizes characteristics of a community of otherness:

To review, a community consists of diverse individuals who are honest and open with each other, trust each other, engage in ethical behavior, and are committed to living together. Members of a community are civil to each other, and they value diversity while, at the same time, they search for the commonalities humans share. Community makes life worth living[,] and the existence of community makes peace and intergroup harmony possible. While community occurs in groups, individuals must take the responsibility for building community in their marriages, workplaces, schools, cities, nations, and the world. Finally, members of a community behave ethically. (p.

367)

It is important to further examine the relationship between a community of otherness and knotworking to facilitate building a multicultural symbiotic community for creative and innovative systems of human activity.

## Note

1. The cross-cultural training was conducted based on the consignment business by Shizuoka Prefecture. The title of the project is: "Developing practical cross-cultural training to facilitate intercultural understandings for fiscal 2008." The representative of the project is Dr. Hiroko Nishida, Professor of School of International Relations at University of Shizuoka, Japan.

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