Cultural Competence as a Fundamental Component for Effective Cross-cultural Education Programs

Benson K. Kamary, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Tongmyong University

Abstract

Several Christian universities in Korea have opened admission to international students from especially the developing nations with a view of equipping them for church ministry and leadership. These institutions of higher learning have constructively developed academic programs in order to build a shared vision with learners from different cultural backgrounds. In such a context, cultural based challenges become a reality, sometimes affecting teaching and learning processes. This paper reflects on the necessity of building cultural competence (for both the learners and instructors) as a way of increasing effectiveness of cross-culture academic programs. The author utilizes his experiences as an international student as well as a professor in a Korean university setting. The study proposes administrative, instructional and integrative framework for developing a culturally competent pedagogy for effective cognition of the shared vision. Kosin University was selected as a case survey.

Introduction

Institutions of higher learning in Korea are increasingly experiencing a wider range of cultural diversity as students, and sometimes faculty, from different cultural backgrounds become part of the university communities. Universally, 21st century classrooms are becoming culturally diverse and therefore demanding efforts to identify effective methods of teaching and learning (Richards et al., 2004). The necessity for pedagogical approaches that are culturally responsive will continue to increase in the next decades as many nations, including Korea, face the reality of globalization.

A cross-culture educational context requires instructors who are capable of educating learners not only the curriculum content but to develop cultural competency—congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enables that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross–cultural situations (Cross et al., 1989). Cultural competence involves such aspects as customs, histories, experiences, language and learning abilities (Gollnick & Chinn, 2002). In educational setting, it means that those given the responsibility to discharge academic programs for culturally diverse classes either as policy makers or instructors ought to utilize theoretically sound and culturally responsive pedagogy. In any case, for most Christian universities, the goal of academic program is to ready the learners for the service in God's kingdom—a culturally diverse milieu!

Most cross-culture educationists, however, are faced with the challenge of how to create classrooms where all learners, notwithstanding their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, are welcomed and supported, and provided with the most effective means of learning. In other words, educationists reflect on how to develop a culturally responsive instructional environment which minimizes the students' alienation (Heath, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Cultural competency is significant for a Christian university because it facilitates and supports learning and shared vision of

the academic program. It also advances a biblical way of seeing, interpreting and living in the world.

Constructs of Cultural Competency

Cross et al. (1989) use the term "culture" to mean the integrated patterns of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of racial, ethnic, religious, or social groups. Similarly the word "competence" is used to suggest having the capacity to function within the context of culturally integrated patterns of human behavior defined by a group. According to Richards, Brown and Forde (2006) culturally responsive pedagogy comprises three dimensions: (a) institutional, (b) personal, and (c) instructional. The institutional aspect reflects the administration's policies and values. The personal element refers to the cognitive and emotional processes instructors and learners need to engage in so as to be culturally responsive. The instructional aspect involves language of instruction, materials, strategies, and activities that form the foundation of instruction. It is important to recognize that all the three scopes interact throughout the teaching and learning processes because they are important for developing and delivering an effective academic program for cross-culture learners (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995; Gay, 2002;).

Cultural competence also comprises of awareness, knowledge, skills, and advocacy. People who are culturally competent are also aware of their own cultural heritage and the values associated with it (Sue and Sue, 2003). This helps to develop acceptance of and respect for differences. It takes a deliberate effort so that they are actively in the process of becoming aware of their own assumptions, biases, and preconceived notions about others. People who are culturally competent are comfortable with differences that exist in terms of race, gender, and other socio-demographic variables. Cultural differences are not to be viewed in a negative light. Campinha-Bacote (2013) utilizes a graphical representation (see below) to show how key cultural constructs are interdependent. The foundational construct of "imago Dei" (image of God) is continuously being permeated throughout each of the other five constructs: cultural desire, cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, cultural skill and cultural encounter.
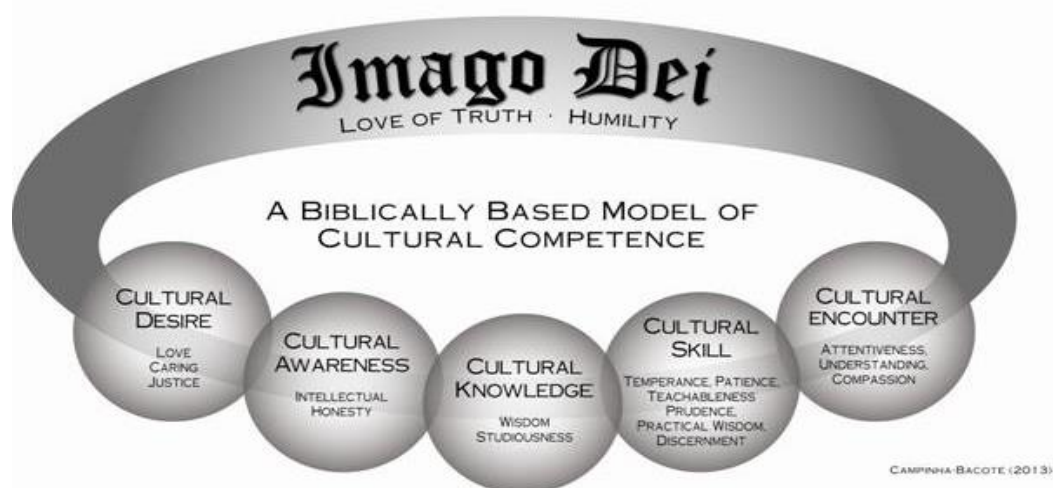
Campinha-Bacote's biblical based model of cultural competence is significance for comprehending cultural context in any field particularly in cross-culture education. When all human beings are first viewed as God's image bearers, it becomes easier to inculcate a shared vision as a community of faith. In his book *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge (2010), describes a shared vision as "a force in people's hearts, a force of impressive power....a picture that everyone in the company

[university] carries in their heads and hearts" (p. 192). In other words effective cross-cultural pedagogy leads to a common worldview. For a Christian university, the core of shared vision is the biblical worldview devoted toward culturally competent and responsive way of exploring education and engaging God's world.

Is Cultural Competence Biblical?

Culture and its place in education have been explored in many ways by different thinkers. For example, Mvududu (2010) notes that there is a compelling reason for Christians to be culturally competent. In fact, he argues that cultural competence is required of believers when they consider Jesus' command to us "to love one another" (John 13:34). In the command to love the "other," cultural competence necessitates knowing that "other" person and listening to him or her. Indeed, as Mvududu (2010) emphasizes, knowing a person is more than just listening to their story. "It must also mean understanding and appreciating the differences between her/his story and our own. We need to have cultural competence to love across boundaries" (para. 3). For Christians therefore, being culturally competent is not just a good idea but a mandate.

Cultural competence goes beyond awareness since effective instructors are to possess specific knowledge and information about the learners if they are to fellowship in their exploration of knowledge. Phuntsog (1998) suggests that the first step to achieving a culturally responsive pedagogy is a self-reflective analysis of one's attitudes and beliefs about teaching a culturally diverse group. Cross-cultural knowledge leads to a deeper understanding of the worldview of culturally diverse communities (Mvududu, 2010). A culturally responsive pedagogy, therefore, does not necessarily mean teaching methodology but also encompasses perspectives, understanding, and the nature of interactions instructors and students have. From a biblical perspective, culturally responsive teaching is a holistic approach to instruction. Since most people groups bear intertwining of culture and religion, "when we become followers of Christ all cultures are suspect…and we must examine them in light of God's Word" (Woodley, 1956, p.53). Christian instructors are therefore to "exemplify the person and teaching of Christ in a manner that can be clearly perceived across all culture" (Breckenridge & Breckenridge, 1997, p.118).

Our cultural perspectives are inescapable. Nevertheless, as Christians, our cultural perspectives must be refined lest we become cultural idolaters. To liberate ourselves from cultural our strong cultural blindness encountering the "other" is significant because it allows us to see our biases against others (Lingenfelter, 2008, Mvududu, 2010). Vanier (2005) asserts that "when we encounter, we come to know. When we come to know, we are able to understand. When we understand, healing and peace can really grow" (p.7). In such a cross-culture encounter, Christian educators need to shift their thinking from "taking God to a godless world to the view that we are following God into a world in which God is already redemptively present" (Brueggermann & Stroup, 1998, p.8).

Cultural Competence verses Default Cultures

What does culture have to do with an academic program? And what does cultural competence have to do with instructing a shared vision? To see the relationship between culture, academic program and vision, one has to begin with the acknowledgement that culture is not neutral. Cultures reflect certain worldview assumptions about reality—including the view of man, view of

education and indeed everything created. Culture instrumentally shapes how we see, interpret and live in the world including how we teach or learn. We are all cultural beings because every person has cultural lenses through which he or she views the world (Mvududu, 2010).

Secondly, it critical to recognize that culture is God's gift to humanity but man's rebellion against God has defiled it and thus all educators and learners in a cross-culture setting ought to seek epistemological humility—a term used in this paper to refer to an understanding of the limits of philosophical/worldview perspectives. Epistemological humility may encompass four cardinal virtues: prudence, courage, patience, and justice (Andrews, 2013). Exercising epistemological humility in a cross-culture academic program means that a professor, for instance, allows opportunity for learning from his students' cultural background or to listen to students' feedback on the professor's own default culture. This aspect of collaborative learning also enhances the idea of learning as a relational activity. Lingenfelter (2008) defines default culture as "the culture people learn from their parents and peers from birth, with all the inherent strengths and weaknesses of their society (p. 71)." Understanding the vulnerability of default culture in a classroom setting can help to increase cultural competence, allow for the development of mutual respect, freedom and effective critique on things that matter for the learning community.

C.S. Lewis, a profound thinker and writer argued that every culture has its own blind spots, its own viewpoint. And from that stance, it superficially perceives certain truths especially predisposed to make certain blunders (in Mangalwadi, 2009). Vishal Magawaldi (2009) contends that unless we see the world through others' eyes, we may inhabit a tiny universe, one in which we will suffocate. Magawaldi's sentiments echoes a Chinese saying that if one wants to know about water, they must not ask the fish because the fish is so accustomed to its water that it may never know when and to what extend the water is polluted. Thus examining one's own cultural milieu is vital for developing cultural competency.

One way that Korean culture may constrict cultural competency is by its heavy reliance on Confucian worldview which, in a class setting, perceives teacher as the main custodian of knowledge. As Yook and Albert (1998) note, instructors in Korea are highly respected and are never contradicted. Students often expect the professor to initiate communication, and they speak only when asked to by the instructor. Even if the instructor says something the student does not understand, learners view it as relatively inappropriate to 'interrupt' the instructor. While this model of teaching is accepted in Korea, international students accustomed to Socratic way of learning i.e. question-answer-discussion model may find it difficult to study under Korean approach. Also, international students may easily be interpreted as rude or disrespectful if they kept asking questions or challenge the position of the professor in a given subject. Correspondingly, non-Korean instructors and learners may use their cultural assumptions (at times based on ignorance) leading to adverse judgment of Korean way of life and teaching. Such a situation is likely to distract the vision of the academic program.

Understanding the place of cultural competence in education is thus paramount in shaping the vision of the cross-culture education program. For Christian universities, Christ-centered view of culturally responsive pedagogy is a critical necessity. Lingenfelter (2008) points out that Biblical principle "transcend both our human sinfulness and the prison of our culture" (p. 9). To achieve competency, educators and learners must approach education from Christ-centered-learner-focused approach where academic activities lead hearts to Christ and where learners' experiences, background and talents are holistically accommodated as a community of faith.

Cultural Competence and Compelling Vision

Christian institutions bear the desire to build community of faith through its educational program undertaken from a Christian perspective. If this is true, then a holistic approach of the nature of students' background and the structure of the curriculum must reflect the core purpose of the institution. Developing cultural competence is instrumental in building trust within a relational community since education is profoundly a relational activity. The vision of an academic program for training Christian leaders requires proper comprehension so that it may remain alive from orientation to graduation and into the field. In other words, the vision must be culturally relevant and compelling for service and leadership.

In a setting where a holistic vison is shaped and developed, cultural competence can be understood "operationally" as the integration and transformation of knowledge and experiences into a specific view of life—a Christian worldview. Such integration effectively leads a cross-culture academic program to live up to its shared vision. Diversity can be celebrated genuinely when cultural backgrounds are explored, accepted, and respected from a biblical viewpoint. We must be aware that diversity also exists between 'shared cultures'. For example it would be incorrect to assume that all students from Africa (a continent of 55 countries) have shared cultural backgrounds and similar experiences. In addition, it cannot be assumed that South Asians students are culturally similar. A group may share common historical and geographical familiarities yet individuals may share nothing beyond similar physical appearance, language, or spiritual beliefs (Cross et al., 1989).

It is critical for institutions admitting cross-culture learners to assess the nature of academic program and related policies with consciousness that supports dynamics of cross-cultural interactions. This way, cultural knowledge can be institutionalized through integration of cultural undercurrents and the aspects of the education program. Institutions like Kosin University which established cross-culture educational programs bear opportunities to develop cultural competency for training servant leaders. These programs are to equip leaders and help them understand that leading is inspiring people to participate as a community (diversity notwithstanding) to follow the leader and be empowered to achieve a compelling vision of faith. Cross-culturally, leading means inspiring people from different backgrounds to participate in the empowerment as a community, to achieve a captivating Christ-centered vision (Lingenfelter, 2008).

Kosin University: A Case Survey

While most of the teaching at Kosin University is done in Korean language, some programs are designed for international students hence English is the language of instruction. Two or these programs, Masters of Divinity and Masters of Arts in Christian Education, are based at Yeong-do Campus and are under partial or full scholarship.

M.Div. program was established to equip students with scriptural knowledge and an understanding of reformational theology to be pastors and leaders in their own countries. Upon graduation students may receive ordination from their home denomination or from their supporting churches in Korea. The program is for three years (six semesters) and covers, among academic areas: Biblical Theology, Biblical Exposition, Biblical Geography, History of Israel, New Testament, Old Testament, Systematic Theology, Reformed Theology, Church and the Last Things, Church History, Practical Theology and Missiology. On the other hand, M.A. (Christian Education) Program exists to train students to be professional educators who contribute to the building and expansion of God's

Kingdom and His Church through academic research on the theories and practices of education from Christian worldview perspectives. The program aims at equipping educators with fundamentals of a Christian view of education research, modern trends in education and various issues of education. It also aims at empowering learners to cultivate creative and scientific research ability on educational phenomena. Upon graduation students may continue to study for a higher degree in Korea or elsewhere.

Culturally, the international students and faculty have represented a diverse group. For instance, since the inception of M.Div. Program in 2008 there have been students from Vietnam, Ghana, Kenya, Korea, Mongolia, China, USA, Cambodia, Malawi, Tanzania, Zambia, Ethiopia, Burundi, Zimbabwe, The Philippines and Uganda. Similarly, professors have come from the USA, South Africa, Kenya, Australia, Korea and Canada.

① **Survey Description**

The aim of the survey was to measure cultural competency of Kosin University's graduate programs for international students. The survey utilized a questionnaire with 10 questions and additional space for personal suggestion/recommendation. On the survey sheet, the term "cultural competence" (as per the context of study) was defined as consistent behaviors, attitudes, teaching styles, and policies used in an education program and enables the program to be effective in cross–cultural situations (it mainly involve teaching and learning environment but may also encompass orientation, communication styles, or simply life patterns in the institution). In total, 25 respondents (18 current students and seven [most recent] alumni) participated in the survey.

② **Survey Outcome and Discussion**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
My university is culturally competent (culturally sensitive)	4%	52%	12%	28%	4%
My Korean professors are culturally competent.	8%	36%	36%	14%	4%
My foreign professors are culturally competent.	16%	60%	8%	0%	0%
The language of instruction is used satisfactorily for learning.	4%	56%	16%	24%	0%
I sometimes experience cultural conflict in classroom.	36%	32%	24%	8%	0%
The office(s) handling international students is/are culturally competent	8%	12%	32%	40%	8%
The vision of my academic program is clear to me.	36%	28%	28%	4%	4%
The university's mission and vision is clear to me.	28%	32%	20%	20%	0%
Cultural competency is important for my studies	60%	36%	4%	0%	0%
Lack of cultural competency affects my study and life on campus.	40%	40%	16%	4%	0%
Suggestion(s) to improve cultural competence in the university.	*Results were varied.				

The outcome of the survey portrays diverse level of cultural competency for each category. Majority (96%) of respondents agree that cultural competency is important for their studies. Similarly, 80% acknowledged that general lack of cultural competency somehow affects their study life. Many respondents (68%) acknowledged that they experienced some kind of cultural conflict in the classroom situations. Also showing a notable representation is whether the office(s) handling international students is culturally competent. Although 32% of the respondents remained neutral, 48% of the respondents disagreed with the statement implying that the office(s) handling international students may not be visibly competent regarding cultural sensitivity. It is encouraging to notice that over 60% of students understand the vision of both the academic program and the university in general. Slightly above half of the respondents agreed that Kosin University is culturally competent. This could be attributed to the fact that the M.Div. Program has been ongoing for about six year now.

Personal suggestions were varied although the majority of respondents recommended that Korean native professors and offices handling cross-culture students should be more open about other cultures. Many respondents held a view that some Korean instructors and administrators considered Korean culture as more superior than others. This might be reflected in the 80% who agreed that lack of cultural competency somehow affects their study life on campus. A number of respondents suggested that cultural integration program should be systemized and broadened beyond field trips so that the new comers can understand the basic cultural assumptions and expectations. Another common comment is that cross-culture students can guided to self-evaluate themselves, and be allowed to exercise freedom of thought and interactions in classroom situations.

Although, this case study may not be representative of cross-culture education programs across Korea due to its small sample size, it provides a glimpse of the nature of multi-cultural education vis-à-vis cultural competency. The study bears a limitation in that it considered the view of cross-culture learners and not instructors. It would be interesting to know what, particularly Korean instructors and administrators think about handling international students from diverse cultures.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has reflected on the issue of cultural competence and its place in the context of cross-culture educational program in a Christian institution. The study has theoretically explored the necessity for institutions with cross-culture academic programs. In addition, the study affirms the need to develop cultural competence in order to carry out culturally responsive pedagogy through which shared vision can be realized. The case study has provided important statistics on cultural competency of Kosin University's international programs providing pointers for possible improvements.

To contribute towards culturally competent cross-culture program which inspire shared vision, the author recommends the following strategies based on the case-study outcome and his experience an international student and an instructor.

i.   Administrative Feature: The universities with cross-culture programs should consider creating awareness among its staff who handle diverse groups. Administrative structure should specifically emphasize culturally sensitive communication, instruction and other interactions in order to create a culturally responsive environment. Training workshops on cultural competence would be helpful.

ii.   Instructional Feature: Instructors of cross-culture classes can begin by exploring their own personal histories, customs, and experiences and reflect on how that relate to their

teaching. This aspect may involve reflective thinking, writing and interactions where feedback is sought and improvement encouraged.

iii.   Learning Cross-Cultural Perspectives: Since "our cultural assumptions are credibly useful in one context and misleading in another (Lingenfelter, 2008, p. 59)," it is imperative for international students to learn basic constructs of Korean culture as much as it is necessary for the professors to be culturally competent. Learning various cultural perspectives involves building awareness of basic history, dominant worldview structure (i.e. Confucianism) and cultural expectations. A subject on cross-culture ministry would be significant.

Overall, the author proposes what Cross and et al. (1989) term as important consideration for an institution to be culturally competent. It should (1) value diversity, (2) have the capacity for cultural self–assessment, (3) be conscious of the "dynamics" inherent when cultures interact, (4) institutionalize cultural knowledge, and (5) develop practical adaptations to reflect an understanding of diversity between and within cultures.

List of References

Andrews, M. (2013, May). Practicing epistemic humility. *Sententias*. Retrieved from
        http://sententias.org/tag/epistemic-humility/

Brueggemann, W. & Stroup, G. W. (Eds.). (1998). *Many voices one God: Being faithful in a pluralistic world*. Louisville, KY: Westminister John Knox Press.

Campinha-Bacote, J. (2013). A biblically based model of cultural competence. Retrieved from
        http://www.transculturalcare.net/BibleModel.htm

Cross, T., Bazron, B., Dennis, K., & Isaacs, M., (1989). Towards a culturally competent system of care. Retrieved from http://www.culturediversity.org/cultcomp.htm

Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for culturally responsive teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53*(2),* 106–116.

Gollnick, D. M., & Chinn. (2002). *Multicultural education in a pluralistic society* (6th ed.). New York, NY: Merril.

Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life, and work in communities and classrooms*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Lingenfelter, S. G. (2008). *Leading cross-culturally: Covenant relationships for effective Christian leadership.* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

Mangalwadi, V. (2009). *Truth and transformation: A manifesto for ailing nations*. Seattle, WA: YWAM.

Mvududu, N. (2010). Culturally responsive teaching: The bible tells me so. Retrieved from
        http://iccjournal.org/issues/v5i1/v5i1-mvududu/

Phuntsog, N. (1998, April). *The magic of culturally responsive pedagogy: In search of the genie's lamp in multicultural education*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, CA.

Richards, H., Brown, A., & Forde, T. (2004). Addressing diversity in schools: Culturally responsive pedagogy. *National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems*. http://www.nccrest.org/Briefs/Diversity_Brief.pdf

Sue, D. W, & Sue, D. (2003). *Counseling the culturally diverse: Theory and practice* (4th ed.). New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons.

Vanier, J. (2005). *Encountering the other*. New York, NY: Paulist Press.

Wlodkowski, R., & Ginsberg, M. (1995). A Framework for culturally responsive teaching. *Educational Leadership*, 53, 17–21.

Woodley, R. (1956). *Living in color: Embracing God's passion for diversity*. Grand Rapids: MI Chosen Books.

Yook, E. L., & Albert, R. D. (1998). Perceptions or the appropriateness or negotiation in educational settings: A cross-cultural comparison among Koreans and Americans. *Communication Education*, 47, 18–29.

Article Review

Sharon (Shin Mee) Lee
Namseoul University

With the growing diversity of the student body and faculty in Korea, cross-cultural issues have become the central focus in faculty and program development in Christian higher education institutions. It is becoming more and more imperative that administrators and faculty members continually develop cultural competency, which will enable them to connect with, respond to, and interact effectively with their peers and students. Christian higher education institutions bear this responsibility even more than other higher institutions because, as the author asserts, being culturally competent is a mandate.

This article deals with the issue of administrative, instructional, and integrative frameworks for developing culturally competent pedagogy for the effective dissemination of a shared vision using the case of Koshin University as a prime example. Cultural competency has been regarded as critically important in developing a Christ-centered pedagogy in Christian higher education. The author reflected on the issue of cultural competency and its place in the context of cross-culture educational programs in a Christian institution by exploring the necessity of culturally inclusive academic programs and the need to develop cultural competence in order to carry out culturally responsive pedagogy through which a shared vision can be realized.

The author convincingly claims the place of cultural competency in education as paramount in shaping the vision of a cross-cultural education program. The author further contests that when a holistic vision is shaped and developed, the sum of that learning and experience coalesces into a "Christian worldview," which can cross racial, ethnic, and culture divisions. However, taking into consideration the culture mores of particular groups of people can ease the promulgation of this Christian worldview.

Based on the outcome of the case study and the author's experiences as an international student and instructor, the author recommends three strategies:

The first involves equipping the administration to communicate sensitively via cultural competency workshops. I would agree with this assertion, but I would add that these workshops and other efforts to instill cultural competency at the administrative level should be implemented at the institution's strategic planning stage.

In the second strategy, the author outlines the importance of the instructors' own self reflection regarding his or her personal histories and applying those experiences to classroom life. The author mentions that feedback in this regard is important, but it is also crucial to consider the type of feedback. In addition to qualitative feedback from students and supervisors, obtaining rubrics that include hard data are essential to develop programs fostering cultural competence in the classroom.

Thirdly, the author suggests creating a class for international students to acquaint themselves with the essentials of Korean culture. While that argument is unimpeachable, I would also add that Korean culture should be a focal point of the curriculum but not held as a superior example. In developing cross-culture educational program in Christian universities, cultural competency

does not necessarily mean assimilation of all into one binding culture, but rather an understanding of the mosaic of different experiences in an international classroom setting.

In conclusion, the main five suggestions of Cross and et al. (1989), which the author outlines, are all essential to the goal of competent pedagogy: to emphasize diversity, to encourage self-assessment, to be cognizant of the dynamics of cultural interaction, to methodize the accrual of cultural knowledge, and to implement practices to cultivate cross-cultural understanding. As a final assessment, this article forms a clear, meticulous, and adaptable blueprint for promoting cultural competency in Christian higher education.