

BUILDING INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS WITH FORCE-IT62

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Abstract. Flexibility, Openness, Respect, Cultural Empaty, Emotional Stability, Initiative, Trust. Seven scales on which the FORCE-IT62 scan scores, generating a personal bar graph about intercultural competence. Supported by lectures in the field of Intercultural Communication, students learn about and reflect on their knowledge, attitude and skills when communicating in a cultural diverse environment.

Keywords: Intercultural communication; culture; diversity; intercultural competence; globalization; migration; urbanization; Force-IT62

Introduction

Aeres University of Applied Sciences (from now *AUAS*) based in Wageningen, the Netherlands, is the only institute in the country focusing on teacher education in the land-based sector. It is part of the Aeres group: An educational conglomerate offering land-based education from pre-vocational until Master level.

Originally attracting a lot of students from ‘the countryside’, *AUAS*’s population can be described as quite monocultural (and conservative?), this while the sectors diversity is continuously increasing. To prepare the students on a career where they come across a variety of people who all have their own customs and traditions, a team of lecturers of *AUAS* (of which the writer is part) designed a course in *Intercultural Communication*. A course where students learn to put their own culture into perspective using The *FORCE-IT62* scan (Van Oudenoven, Ridder & Van Der Zee 2007). This paper describes the way this scan can help raising students cultural awareness.

1. The need for intercultural competence

We live in a time of increasing globalization, migration and urbanization, which leads to a society characterized by growing diversity in a social and professional context. These developments may offer opportunities and dynamic development, they may also lead to anxiety, misunderstandings and xenophobia. How to handle these aspects of modern living and employ them to identify opportunities without

being blind for threats? To function successfully in transcultural situations in a national, multicultural or international context, awareness of one's own cultural background and intercultural attitudes is important. This awareness can be raised by the use of the FORCE-IT62 scan. The awareness is a first step in achievement of the cross-cultural competencies as described in the European INCA framework.

Competencies enable people to apply knowledge, attitudes and skills in the professional situation. Cross-cultural competencies enable people to perform professional tasks successfully in a transcultural context.

In the minor Intercultural Communication the student learns to take a proactive and self-reflective role and develop professional relationships in a foreign and/or multicultural context, in their professional career at home and abroad. The FORCE-IT62 scan can be -and is being- used in numerous occasions, ranging from education to the armed forces and insurance companies.

2. The force-IT62 scan

2.1. Introduction to the scan

Van Oudenoven et al. describe the scan as "A questionnaire to assess one's competencies to function in a complex intercultural environment." It consists of 62 questions measuring 7 scales, summarized in the letters FORCE-IT, hence the name. The participant gets his scores in a bar graph with each score ranging from 0 – 50, the trainer is able to generate background information based on the score.

In the following paragraphs the competencies are described together with the approach from an educational point of view. Important to know, is that scores on the scales are value-free: higher isn't 'better'.

2.2.1. F – Flexibility

This scale is associated with people's ability to adjust their behavior to new and unknown situations. When cooperating with people from other cultures it is important to be able to change strategies because customary and trusted ways of doing things do not always work in other cultural environments. People who score high on flexibility perceive new and unknown situations as a challenge. They are able to change behavioral patterns in response to unexpected or constrained circumstances within another culture. People who score low are quicker to see new and unknown situations as a threat. In addition they tend to stick to trusted behavioral patterns. Consequently they are less able to adjust their behavioral pattern in reaction to unexpected or constrained circumstances in another culture (Van Oudenoven et al. 2007).

Reflecting on flexibility, we are asking to what extent the student is able to adapt to an 'other' educational system or unknown professional setting. Are they able to set aside the way they are used to work, and are they able to blend in a new system easily or not? What are past experiences of the students starting to work in a new and unknown environment and what do they think their strong and weak points are?

In what norms, values and vision can they be flexible and what do they want to keep no matter the situation?

Behavioural aspects of people low in flexibility *can be* a high need of structure and preparation, a rigid mindset, and being easily upset. Behavioural aspects of people high in flexibility *can be* losing control easily and being chaotic quickly.

O – Openness

This scale assesses people's capacity to be open and unprejudiced when encountering people outside of their own cultural group or organisation who may have different values and norms. This ability, just like cultural empathy, seems vital to understanding the rules and values of other cultures and to coping with them in an effective manner. People who score high on openness have an open and unprejudiced attitude towards other groups, cultural values and norms and are open to new ideas. People who score low are characterized by a predisposed attitude and a tendency to judge and stereotype other groups (Van Oudenoven et al. 2007).

The description of openness is close to the ones of Respect and Cultural Empathy. It is distinguishable by the focus on the way the students look at 'the group' they are interacting with. Can they observe the behaviour of the group unprejudiced and are they open to 'the way things are done there.' Are they open to blend into a different group of teachers? And how will they handle diversity in a group of students? This competency can be seen as preparatory for Cultural Empathy.

Behavioural aspects of people low in openness *can be* being biased, having wrong assumptions and always looking through 'Western' eyes. Behavioural aspects of people high in openness *can be* forgetting their own cultural preferences and being persistent in questioning cultural aspects.

2.2.2. R – Respect

This scale pertains to people's tendency to accept people unconditionally. The core is demonstrating respect and esteem for a person's worth as a human being, even though others apparently have different opinions, attitudes or – in the person's view – deviant behavior. In many cultures showing respect is considered as a basic human factor to build and maintain good relationships. People who score high on respect take care not to hurt people's feelings and to protect another's face or esteem. People who score low tend to base their actions primarily on their own views and objectives, disregarding another's worth, autonomy and vulnerability (Van Oudenoven et al. 2007).

Whilst 'respect' being an all-purpose word, Van Oudenoven et al.'s description tends to place it in the context of one-on-one contact. Reflecting on this competency, we're trying to make the students aware of the way they look at the people they are directly interacting with. Are they able to interact with students and teachers without judging their cultural behaviour? Do they see their partners as equal? Do they know how you can treat your partners respectfully, also from their (or a neutral) point of view?

Behavioural aspects of people low in Respect *can be* being blunt and treating others as inferior. Behavioural aspects of people high in Respect *can be* being submissive and not daring to ask questions.

2.2.3. C – Cultural Empathy

This scale assesses the capacity to identify with the feelings, thoughts and behavior of individuals from different cultural backgrounds. To function effectively with people of other cultures, it is important to acquire some understanding of those cultures, and cultural empathy seems important to "reading" other cultures. People who score high on cultural empathy are able to identify with the feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of people and groups who are part of different cultures. People with a low score have difficulties in identifying with the feelings, thoughts and behaviors of people and groups with different cultural backgrounds... (Van Oudenoven et al. 2007).

As said before, Cultural Empathy is close to Openness and Respect. The word "Empathy" is making clear it is not just about being non-judgemental about differences, we are asking the student to reflect on really being open and trying to understand and identify with the culture. We are making an appeal to their *ecological intelligence*: Trying to see and feel how every aspect in a culture is interconnected.

Behavioural aspects of people low in Cultural Empathy *can be* ignoring emotions and 'having their eyes fixed on the screen.' Behavioural aspects of people high in Cultural Empathy *can be* over-involvement, and taking emotions home.

2.2.4. E – Emotional Stability

This scale assesses the degree to which people tend to remain calm in stressful situations. When working in complex settings with many different parties it is important to be able to cope well with psychological and emotional discomfort. A variety of factors (political system, level of economic development, different stakes, interests procedures and cultures) may cause things not to work in the same way as they do in one's own culture or organisation. This may lead to frustration, tension, fear, social detachment and interpersonal conflicts. People who score high on this scale tend to remain calm in stressful situations. People who score low on this scale exhibit strong emotional reactions to stress (Van Oudenoven et al. 2007).

The description of the quote above is comprehensive: how stress resistant is the student? We are letting them think about what they find stressfull and how they can avoid or prepare for stressfull situations. What is their coping mechanism and how can they recognize it?

Behavioural aspects of people low in Emotional Stability *can be* panicking quickly and being nervous all the time.

Behavioural aspects of people high in Respect *can be* being submissive and not daring to ask questions.

A high score in Emotional Stability is a prerequisite for a high score in Initiative.

2.2.5. I – Initiative

Social initiative denotes people's tendency to approach social situations actively and to take initiative. This determines the degree to which one interacts easily with people from different cultures and make friends within other cultures. People who score high on this scale have a tendency to be active in social situations and to take initiative. They will tend to be out-going when in another culture. People who score low on this scale are less inclined to take initiative. They will be rather reserved and stay in the background (Van Oudenoven et al. 2007).

Also “Initiative” says it all: Will the student dip into the new culture quickly or will he –as the Dutch say- ‘watch the cat out of the tree,’ see which way the wind blows. What does the student need to take initiative and if he scores low, what goals can be set to be more out- going.

Behavioural aspects of people low in Initiative *can be* failing to make contact and keeping a low profile. Behavioural aspects of people high in Initiative *can be* being intimidating and being too chummy.

2.2.6. T – Trust

Trust refers to people’s tendency to take the risk to trust others and to accept that one cannot control all conditions neither others’ intentions or behaviors. Being the first to show trust is the only way to create trusting relationships, a necessary ingredient of successful cooperation in complex settings. People who score high on this scale approach others with an open agenda and have faith in others’ good intentions. They delegate important tasks easily and assume that others will do their best to keep their promises. People who score low on this scale have little confidence in others and try to avoid becoming dependent upon others. They appear to believe that they can rely only upon themselves (Van Oudenoven et al. 2007).

Do you dare to let go and still have trust in a good outcome? How come? We try to develop different views on working abroad and let students reflect on their attitude towards the place they are going. Students going to ‘Western’ countries often go with the intention to learn, but in the past few years we also noticed that some students going to less developed countries have got more problems putting good trust in their new environment.

Behavioural aspects of people low in Trust *can be* being prejudiced and assuming lies. Behavioural aspects of people high in Trust *can be* being naive and taking anything for an answer.

3. The scan and the lectures

After the introduction of the course the students fill out the questionnaire. During the course, lectures are about Intercultural Communication, diving into subjects as Gender, Poverty, Race and Ethnicity, Globalization, Theories of Communication and Interculturalism, et cetera. “An Introduction to Intercultural Communication” (Jandt, 2019) is used as main source.

Constantly looking at their own customs and beliefs, the students learn to put their own culture into perspective, making them aware of the fact they have got a strong cultural bias. After six weeks of lectures they will do a twelve week internship in an intercultural setting, where they can put their new found focus on Intercultural Communication into practice and where they will conduct a research on an intercultural topic.

After the internship they present their research, combined with their personal intercultural experiences.

Though the course is relatively new, results so far have been very positive. Student satisfaction is high, claiming they have taken big steps in their personal development. The FORCE-IT62 scan proves its worth, making it a great tool for reflection on an intercultural attitude. Curious about the scan? Feel free to enquire about doing it yourself!

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