

UNESCO Story Circles for developing intercultural competences in higher education students within a heterogeneous society context

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Resumen: Los Círculos de narraciones fueron diseñados por la Darla Deardorf (2020) junto con la UNESCO como una herramienta intercultural práctica para desarrollar y practicar competencias interculturales que se pueden utilizar con diferentes grupos de personas en muchos entornos alrededor del mundo. Los Círculos de narraciones ayudan a los participantes a desarrollar competencias interculturales como la escucha para la comprensión, la curiosidad cultural, la empatía y la reflexión sobre las diferencias. Se pueden utilizar en una variedad de entornos para mejorar las interacciones humanas a través de las diferencias, ya sea dentro de una sociedad (diferencias debido a la edad, el género, la religión, el estado socioeconómico, la afiliación política, la etnia, etc.) o a través de las fronteras. Aunque se han publicado algunos artículos sobre los Círculos de narraciones con participantes de diferentes nacionalidades, en este estudio los utilizamos para reflexionar sobre las diferencias entre personas dentro de la misma sociedad y con una supuesta "misma cultura". En esta experiencia utilizamos los Círculos de narraciones con estudiantes de una institución de Educación Superior oficial dedicada a las Letras españolas. Organizamos tres pequeños grupos de participantes, en su mayoría argentinos, que completaron un cuestionario de retroalimentación al final de la experiencia. Considerando que la sociedad argentina es profundamente heterogénea en sus creencias, prácticas, rituales e identificaciones, intentamos verificar si las conexiones emocionales que los Círculos de narraciones suelen producir entre las personas que participan en ellos se expresan en los comentarios de nuestros participantes. Los hallazgos corroboran las críticas positivas de todos los participantes, y la propuesta de la metodología de los Círculos de narraciones como una actividad complementaria de capacitación en competencias interculturales fue muy valorada por todos los participantes. El resto del texto se presenta totalmente en inglés.

1. Introduction

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According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural organization (UNESCO), culture is at the core of individual and social identity and is a major component in the reconciliation of group identities within a framework of social cohesion (UNESCO, 2006). Argentina is a multicultural country made up of indigenous peoples and large immigration flows that occurred at different times in this young nation. In the 2022 edition of the Argentine census², for the first time the entire population had the opportunity to answer about ethnic self-recognition (indigenous or native peoples and Afro-descendants) and gender identity, reflecting the diversity present in this country. As it is mentioned by Grimson and Karasik (2017), Argentine society is profoundly heterogeneous in its beliefs, practices, rituals, and identifications. This cultural diversity and heterogeneity is also observed in the classrooms and motivated us to think about activities that can favor the integration and appreciation of interculturality.

In accordance with UNESCO (2013a), intercultural competences refer to having adequate relevant knowledge about particular cultures, as well as general knowledge about the sorts of issues arising when members of different cultures interact, holding receptive attitudes that encourage establishing and maintaining contact with diverse others, as well as having the skills required to draw upon both knowledge and attitudes when interacting with others from different cultures.

There are different ways of defining Intercultural Competence (IC), but for this study we will take Dr. Deardorff (2020, p. 20) definition: "To summarize many existing definitions, intercultural competencies in essence are about improving human interactions across difference, whether within a society (differences due to age, gender, religion, socio-economic status, political affiliation, ethnicity, and so on) or across borders".

The key of the Story Circles (SC) is in the emotional connections made with other participants through this methodology, which often do not happen with other more traditional intercultural training methods. As Deardorff (2020) mentioned, SC engage all three modes of learning: cognitive, socioemotional, and behavioral as a more holistic way of developing IC. So this study tries to verify if this emotional connections are expressed in the participants' feedback.

2. Story Circles

2.1 SC Background

² Official website of the Argentine Government: 2022 census, recognize ourselves through culture. <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/noticias/reconocernos-desde-la-cultura-en-el-censo-2022>

UNESCO is contributing to international peace and prosperity, thanks to the cooperation of every nation in the fields of education, sciences, culture and communication (UNESCO, 2013b). In 2013, recognizing the importance of enhancing the skills, attitudes, and behaviors of individuals for reaching the ambitions of the decade, UNESCO launched the publication *Intercultural Competencies: Conceptual and Operational Framework* (UNESCO, 2013a), providing a comprehensive overview of the importance of developing the capacities to manage growing cultural diversity and clarifying key related concepts and their operational interlinkages. The *Manual for Developing Intercultural Competencies* (Deardorff, 2020) was designed to translate this framework into a more tangible action and to propose a global, accessible methodology to help sensitize diverse audiences to key IC, including listening for understanding, respect, cultural curiosity, empathy, and reflexivity.

2.2. SC Methodology

SC are an approach to developing IC through sharing and reflecting on personal experiences in a group setting. They are a structured yet adaptable tool that focuses on fundamental elements of IC development, including respect, listening, curiosity, self- and other awareness, reflection, sharing, empathy, and relationship building.

The SC are guided by at least one facilitator that will ask some specific questions in order to motivate the participants to share personal experiences. The purpose of the intercultural prompt used in SC is to have participants reflect on their own personal experiences with those who are different from them and share an experience so that the others in the group can begin to see from a different perspective.

2.2.1 Our Project

In this we focused on the formal intercultural learning approach offering an intercultural learning tool within a higher education institution context inside a classroom. The activity was facilitated by the author of this article, as an experienced professor skilled in working with people from diverse backgrounds, researcher on IC and able to implement the SC model. In this paper, we report on a study of SC conducted in June 2023 in our institution, an official Higher Education Institution dedicated to Spanish Letters, 16 persons participated divided in three small groups (two groups with 5 participants and one group with 6 participants). It was an in person non-mandatory activity for the current students. Among this group of 12 women (75%) and 4 men (25%), 81% were Argentinean and 19% were from Venezuela with more than five years of residence in Argentina. The majority (30%) were between the ages of 40-49; 19% came from the 20-29 age group; also 19% were between 30-39 ages; another 19% came from the 60-72 age group; and 13% represented the 50-59 age group.

2.2.2. SC activity facilitation

Following the tested protocol outlined in the Manual, we executed the SC activity over these six phases:

a) Welcome and introduction

The facilitator welcomed all participants individually as they arrived and invited them to be seated in one large circle.

We began explaining the concept of IC, highlighting that to summarize many existing definitions, we consider that IC in essence are about improving human interactions across difference, whether within a society (differences due to age, gender, religion, socio-economic status, political affiliation, ethnicity, and so on) or across borders.

So, we explained that to try to improve this IC, we were going to use the "Story Circles", taking into account that the SC are a strategy designed by UNESCO that is structured, although adaptable, which allows participants to practice intercultural skills and allows emotional connections that may not come through more traditional cross-cultural training. Due to the emotional connection of the participants, this strategy tends to be more transformational than traditional training.

We also remarked that SC are not an intercultural workshop or training, explain that when we finish this activity we will not be able to think that we are already interculturally competent. IC are a lifelong process, so participating in this experience is a step on that path. SC provide an opportunity for participants to practice some key intercultural skills (such as listening for understanding) and improve some aspects of IC. Remarking that during the SC we were going to listen to understand, we were not going to listen to respond, to give an opinion or to judge. (This importance was further emphasized with an item as a "talking piece" that we introduced in the next phase.)

Also, we mentioned that SC operate on two presuppositions: 1) We are all interconnected through human rights; 2) Each person has inherent dignity and worth.

We finished this phase, mentioning the objectives of the SC:

- Show respect for others.
- Practice listening for understanding.
- Cultivate curiosity about similarities and differences with others.
- Increase cultural self-awareness.
- Develop empathy.
- Participate in critical reflection on the own development of IC, as well as on the intercultural experience.
- Develop relationships with other culturally different people.

During this phase we focused on not only setting expectations and framing the overall experience but also in creating a safe space for everyone.

b) *SC process and dynamic*

We explained that the SC was going to be carried out with groups of five members seated in a circle. We delivered and read out loud the activity guides, emphasizing the importance of confidentiality and respect. Also we mentioned that as each person shares his/her story, the others in the group were going to *listen for understanding* and *not* interrupting the story (by asking questions or making comments) until all stories have been told in order to demonstrate respect for the person sharing and forces the listeners to listen more closely to what is being shared.

Here we believed (and then confirmed) that a specific element as a “taking piece” could help us with this purpose of listening for understanding, so we use tennis balls with the following indication: “The one who has the ball in her/his court is the one who can play. The one who has the ball in her/his hand can speak”.

We asked everybody to turn off mobile phones. Participants only kept one device per SC in order to use it as a chronometer for time limits. We explained that the purpose of the time limits was to ensure that each person in the group has the same amount of allotted time. We instructed that the person to the right of the storyteller should be the timekeeper and we decided that showing the chronometer screen was an appropriate non-verbal signal to be used to indicate that there is no more time left.

c) *First round*

We began with the first round, sharing the prompt to be answered.

Prompt 1: Please, tell us your name and one of your nicknames about which you want to share your story. (Who gave it to you? Why? Do you want to share an anecdote about your nickname?).

Knowing that the main goal of this first round is to help participants meet each other, begin to build trust, and begin to feel comfortable sharing with each other interculturally, our proposal worked very well due to nicknames in our culture are closely linked to loved ones.

The participants presented very emotional stories related to their childhoods, their affections and their friendships in relation to nicknames.

Here it is appropriate to highlight the importance of the model response that had been previously given by the facilitator, it created an adequate emotional environment, which facilitated the stories of the participants.

Also, it was helpful to give participants a minute to think about their responses to the prompt and what stories they want to share so that once participants began sharing their

stories, the focus was on listening for understanding. We reminded participants again about not interrupting.

Each participant had two minutes to present their answer. The participant to his/her right was in charge of counting the time and showing the chronometer screen when the time was running out. The round began with the participant whose birthday was closest to the date of the activity, and then the round continued clockwise.

d) Second round

Prompt 2: What is a memorable experience you have had with a person(s) who is different from you (age, religion, gender, socio-economic, culture, nationality, etc.), and what did you learn about yourself and/or the other person in that experience?

The facilitator began by giving a model response as an example and sharing the story and emphasized what she learned from herself and from others, demonstrating vulnerability and the courage to share a personal story.

Seeing that the purpose of this intercultural prompt is to have participants reflect on their own personal experiences with those who are different from them and share an experience so that the others in the group can begin to see from different perspectives, the facilitator remarked that the experience should be about relationships through differences, which could refer to any kind of differences (age, religion, age generation, religion, origin, etc.).

The participants had one minute to reflect on the prompt individually and think of an experience before sharing, and then had three minutes to present their answer.

The prompt worked great. The participants got involved in their stories and shared significant moments demonstrating vulnerability and openness in their stories. The three-minute limit was enough, although some participants finished just in time.

This round added an additional activity: the flashback. During this time, the participants engaged in a flashback in response to the shared stories in order to demonstrate listening for understanding and respect for each other, and also in order to make connections. Participants shared quickly (in 15 seconds or less) the most memorable point they heard from the second story shared.

e) Follow-up discussion

After the flashbacks were finished, the small group began the follow-up discussion using the debriefing questions that are presented in the Manual. The facilitator handed out the written questions to each participant so that they could first reflect personally. Then the group reflection took place.

This follow-up discussion was an oral activity that took approximately 30 minutes.

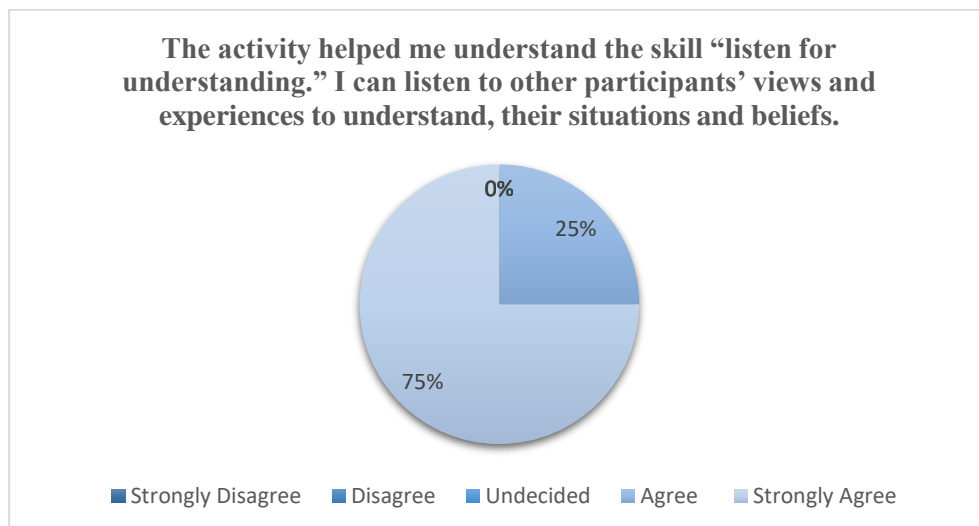
f) Questionnaire and end

Once the follow-up discussion was finished, the facilitator asked the participants to complete a written evaluation/reflection of the experience (Feedback Questionnaire included in the Manual). The facilitator asked participants to take a few moments to comment on the activity, then shared coffee to end the activity in a pleasant way and made closing remarks about the activity they have just experienced.

At this point, the facilitator also took the time to engage participants in a discussion on possible next steps. And finally thanked everyone for participating.

3. Results

The respect for “listening for understanding” was observed among all the participants, and the answers to question #2 of the Questionnaire confirmed that they understood this importance.

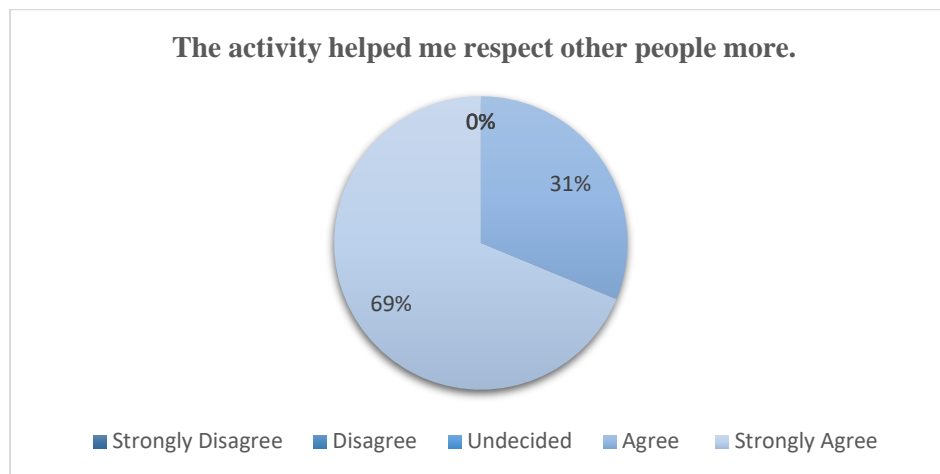


Graph No. 1: Listen for understanding

Source: Created by the author

75% of participants “Strongly agree” and 25% “Agree” with this statement.

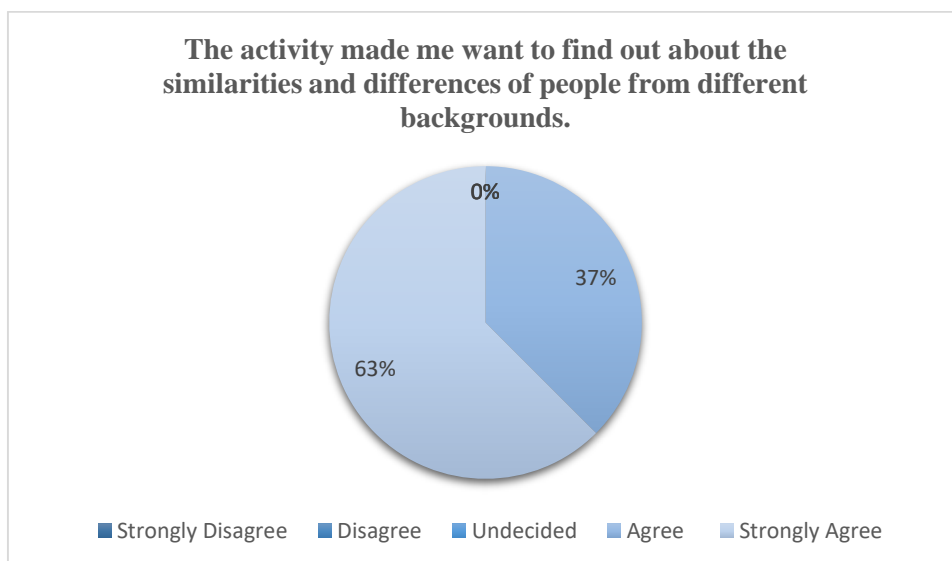
According to the Manual, sharing personal experience not only validates the perspective of each individual but also generates new understandings and insights. Regarding these new understandings, the answers of questions #1, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 are conclusive:



Graph No. 2: New understandings

Source: Created by the author

69% of participants "Strongly agree" with this statement.

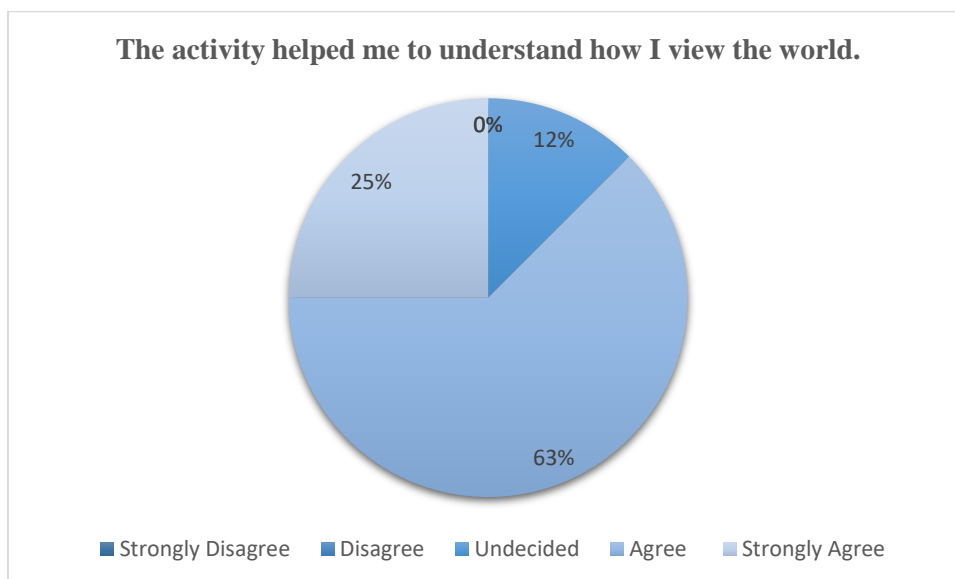


Graph No. 3: New understandings II

Source: Created by the author

63% of participants "Strongly agree" with this statement.

Regarding the question #4, it was the statement with less percentage of "Strongly agree" within the Questionnaire.

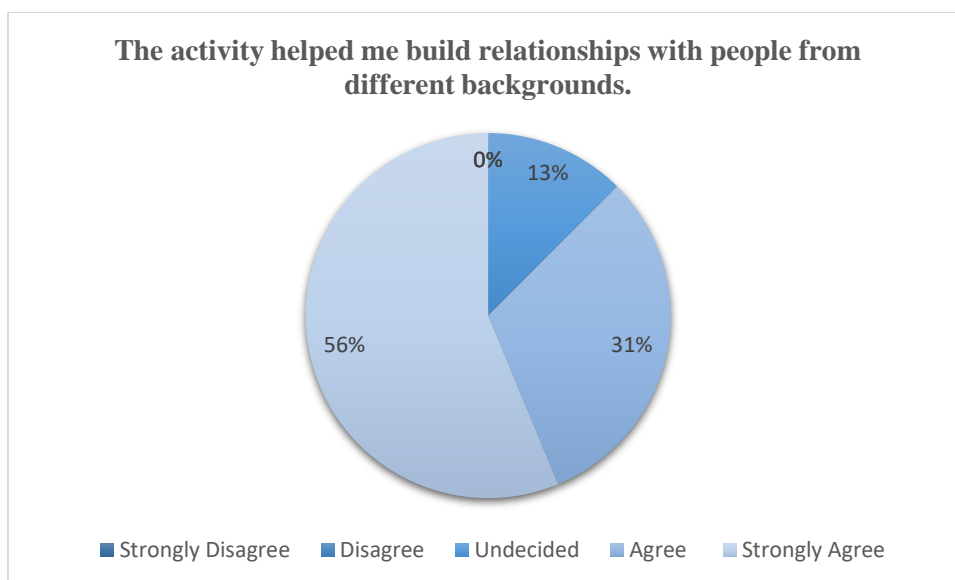


Graph No. 4: New understandings III

Source: Created by the author

63% of participants "Agree", 25% "Strongly agree" and 12% are "Undecided".

Another statement within the Questionnaire with more than 10% of "Undecided" participants is #7.

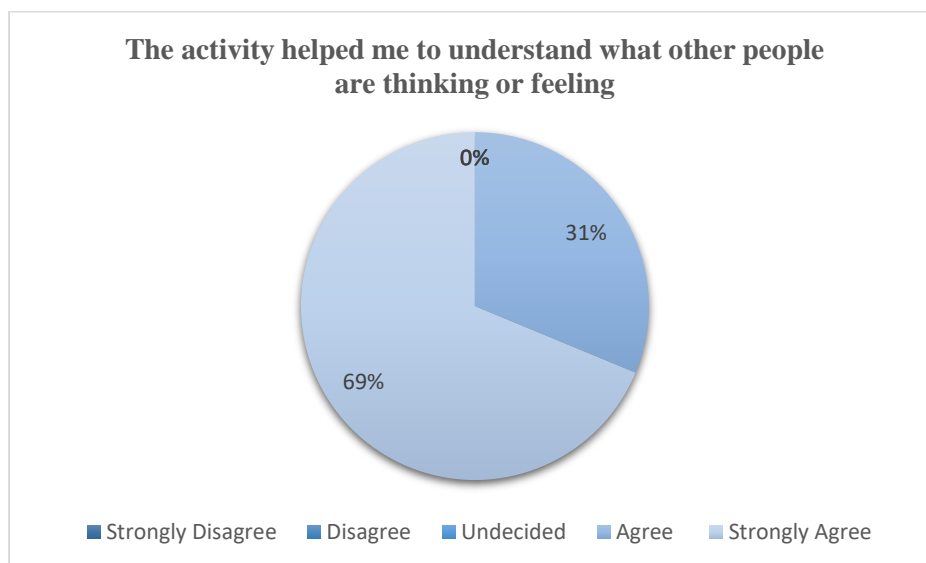


Graph No. 5: New understandings IV

Source: Created by the author

56% of participants "Strongly agree", 31% "Agree" and 13% are "Undecided".

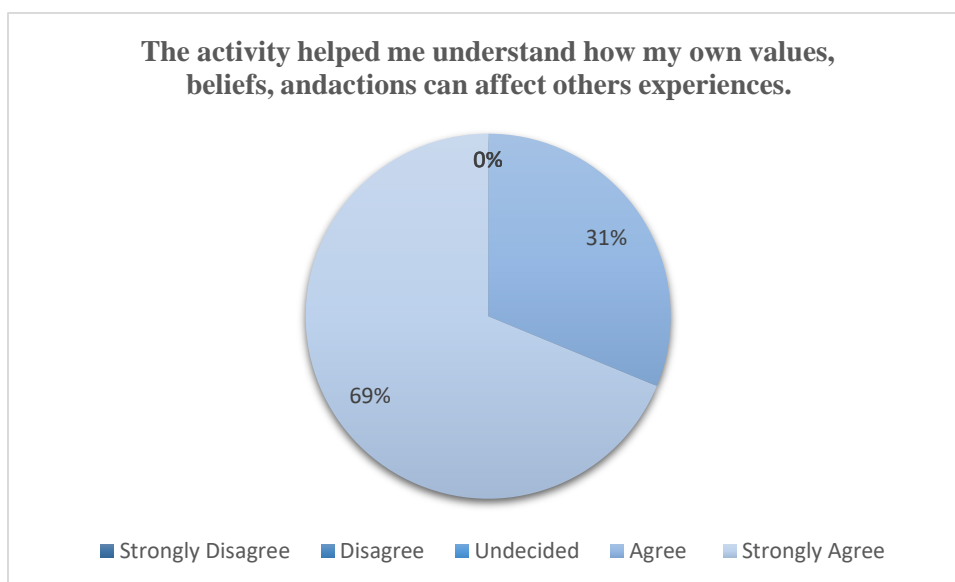
Questions #5 and #7 showed that participants could achieve the Story Circle goal related to IC development and communicating across difference: “Engage in critical reflection of one’s own IC development, as well as on the intercultural experience”:



Graph No. 6: Critical reflection

Source: Created by the author

69% of participants “Strongly agree” and 31% “Agree” with this statement.



Graph No. 7: Own values, beliefs and actions can affect others

Source: Created by the author

69% of participants “Strongly agree” and 31% “Agree” with this statement.

SC engage participants on many levels including emotional, mental, spiritual, and even physical levels. We observed in the Questionnaire some participants' comments that can be related to this:

Table 1: Examples of comments related to emotional connections

Questions	Sample responses
Write down three (3) actions you will now do as a result of this activity.	<p>-Apply the principle of "listening to understand" consciously.</p> <p>-Think about what I learn with each experience and what could remain in the other person.</p> <p>-Share without thinking that the other person is going to judge me.</p>
Write down three (3) actions you will now do as a result of this activity.	<p>-Reflect on intercultural differences and their meaning.</p> <p>-Actively listen to the other person.</p> <p>-Practice empathy.</p>
How would you improve this activity?	I loved the activity, of great individual and group enrichment. I would propose subsequent meetings to continue growing and consolidating the group when synergy is generated.
What are the strengths of this activity?	Sharing with people whom I had never met before. Value their feelings/life history. Respect the time of the other.
What are the strengths of this activity?	Listening to the other person to generate empathy. The creation of synergy.
Any further comments	I rarely have the opportunity to connect from a very human point of view with unknown people.

Source: Created by the author

4. Recommendations and conclusion

SC have proven to be an effective strategy for developing IC. From our experience, we can make the following additional recommendations for SC as a voluntary (not mandatory) activity that is carried out with adult participants who speak the same language as their mother tongue:

- After the introduction and before starting the first round, it is helpful not only to mention, but also to deliver in writing the guideline of SC and the objectives of the experience. It is not necessary to hand it out individually; one or two copies can be shared by each small group.

- In the first round of familiarization, the prompt chosen must generate an emotional connection within the participating community.

- In the second round, related to the intercultural prompt, it is helpful to allow a little more time for the exposition of the participants' stories. In our experience, 2 minutes for the first round and 3 minutes for the second round worked very well. It was also helpful to give participants a minute of silence to think about their responses to the prompt and what stories they wanted to share before starting the round.

- The "taking piece" is a fundamental element to reinforce awareness about listening for understanding.

- During the flashback round, keep using the "taking piece" and control the time (15 seconds) so that this activity continues to respect the parameters of the entire experience.

- For the debriefing, submit the reflection questions in writing and allow the participants a few minutes of personal reflection before sharing it with the whole group.

- As a closing of the activity we recommend sharing food/drinks so that it feels like a celebration of the experience.

- Regarding the activity of the facilitator, we recommend always maintaining a very positive, welcoming and smiling attitude, being attentive to compliance with all the phases and instructions of the activity. During the first few minutes, it is useful to briefly introduce the meaning of IC, the UNESCO SC strategy and what that day's meeting will consist of. After this brief introduction, the details of the dynamics of the activity can be presented.

- We believe that the Manual Questionnaire is extremely useful for evaluating the experience and improving future encounters. It is important to give participants a quiet moment to complete it.

To conclude, in our experience and according to activity observation and the feedback collected through completed participant evaluations, SC engage all three modes of learning: cognitive, socioemotional, and behavioral as an holistic way of developing IC. The key is in the emotional connections made with other participants through this methodology.

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