

Cultural Intelligence: A response to global needs?

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Presently, globalization is a condition organizations all have to relate to both in regard to internal as well as external relations. Globalization is a intertwined relationship between the local and the global, the so called glocal, in which people create flexible transnational as well as trans-cultural communities (Bauman 1998, Giddens 1991). Accordingly, this involves a re-conceptualization of communities and how these are related to (re)constructions of social and personal identities (Hastrup 1995, Appadurai 1996).

Today companies all over the world have developed strategies and tools in order to meet the needs of globalization. Striving to become truly global involves specific knowledge requirements for individual and organizational goal achievement in culturally mixed settings and, furthermore, competences to handle “glocal” encounters.

Based on the processes of re-articulations of communities and identities most companies’ global strategies involve a rethinking of various modes of border-crossing, which has given rise to a request for employees who can navigate in different complex cross-cultural environments.

Cultural intelligence, the new guy in class.

During the last decade, the concept of cultural intelligence has emerged as a response to the literature about cross-cultural competences and management in a global context. Cultural intelligence implies, among different elements, an individual capacity to create (cultural) meta-cognitive competences out of specific knowledge and experiences with the handling of differences (Thomas 2008, Brannen 2009, Earley & Anc 2003). The questions to be addressed to this relatively new concept are manifold. Two lines of inquiry, however, will be advanced in this article.

Firstly, cultural intelligence research concerned with cultural meta-cognition lacks a more profound discussion of how and when and even more important why we generate meta-cognition from specific experiences. Parts of the literature presume that this is partly a question of personality (Earley & Anc 2003), whereas other parts of the literature point to certain experiences and capacities needed in order to generate meta-cognition (Thomas et al 2008, Brannen 2008). Accordingly, I will discuss why and how we should include in our focus the “glocal” re-conceptualization of communities and identities in order to understand our motivation for developing meta-cognition.

Secondly, operating with competences regarding cultural domains makes it important to question the definitions of culture that underpin the research (Egholm Feldt & Jakobsen 2009). Definitions are part of generating our very field of study. That is why I find parts of the literature about cultural intelligence, which presumes a somewhat static concept of

culture, a problem in global contexts. Aligned to this question I will argue that we should consider the employment of a processual and flexible concept of culture as something we *do* and *use* in specific contexts to avoid a too inflexible concept of culture as something we *are*. Such considerations will give rise to a much more relevant understanding and description of the competences needed in the global context of companies.

I explore both these line of inquiry using the material collected by the research team of “Cultural Intelligence as a Strategic Resource”¹.

Meta – cognition, how to understand the unknown.

All research in cultural intelligence is concerned with cognition and especially meta-cognition (Earley 2002, Earley& Anc 2003, Earley and Peterson 2004, Ng, K-Y., & Earley 2006, Ang et al. 2007, Thomas et al. 2008). Though (meta) cognition, for some researchers, only is one of the proxies of cultural intelligence (Earley 2002, Earley& Anc 2003, Earley and Peterson 2004, Ang et al. 2007) it is quite important in regard to learning. That notwithstanding, cognition deals with the everyday understanding of already known items and situations, meta-cognition is the operation, where it becomes possible to understand something unknown. The American pragmatist Charles Sander Peirce analyzes cognition as a semiotic process, whereby he is able to explain the cognitive processes involved in meta-cognition. For Peirce al cognition is first and foremost based on experiences. These experiences can be more or less recognizable, whereas the unknown experiences both call for the use of meta-cognition, as well as they develop the very capacities for meta-cognition.

Though, when we have a new experience, we will try to explain it within our current reservoir of knowledge and thus in relation to similar experiences, which of course will adjust or accommodate our existing schemas to a greater or lesser degree. On the other hand, the new experience may also be rejected in order to hold on to our current used schemata. Only when our existing knowledge and former experiences are insufficient to explain a new experience, we will need to alter our former schemas by abduction (Peirce 1877, Peirce 1931, Illeris 2002 for same perspective). Abduction creates hypothesis, which are presumptions and qualitative guesses. Hence, abduction establishes a sphere of possible implications for the unknown experience based on earlier specific experiences and other general knowledge. From this sphere of implications new analogies are created, transforming the existing frame of understanding. Thus, abduction is the creation of qualitative guesses in order to understand the unfamiliar.

Learning as the notion of the loss of identity.

Accordingly, the formation of meta-cognition relies on the willingness to falsify and challenge the current schemata and frame of understanding, which is used to make sense of the world, over and over again. Many theories of learning both explicitly and implicitly include the notion of a gap. This gap creates in people the feeling of a loss. The loss becomes

¹ The material is collected by “Cultural Intelligence as a Strategic Resource”, a three year externally financed project (2008-2011) in which Anne-Marie Sørderberg (Professor), Lisbeth Clausen (Associate Professor), Liv Egholm Feldt (Assistant Professor), Michael Jacobsen (Associate Professor), Verner Worm (Professor) and Mette Zølner (Associate Professor) all from CBS in Denmark, participate. The research team has privileged access to five of the largest Danish Companies. So far, the first round of interviews has been conducted. Second round of interviews will take place in their subsidiaries in Asia autumn 2009.

the motivation point for bridging the gap, thus transgressing existing schemata (Peirce 1932, Dewey 1938, McWhinney& Markos, 2003:21). The gap is felt when certain experiences are not understandable. Therefore, the readiness to challenge and falsify current schemata involves a gap of comprehension and following a loss of schemata and thus of identity position. Consequently, meta-cognition or abduction always includes the alteration or more radically a change of the frame itself, which on the other hand result in a transformation of identity position. There is no turning back to what you were before the challenging experiences (Egholm Feldt 2009, Illeris 2002:35).

One of our interviewee, Jan² from Company 1, discussed why he had experienced that the intelligence & personality test applied to him and his co-employee in Denmark before selected to expatriation at Asia did not score equally high with the employees in Asia. As he stated;” It is not because they are not as intelligent as we are, this I know for a fact. So there have to be another explanation”. Jan was trapped in an unknown and unexplainable experience, which he needed to make sense of. In order to make sense of this and other similar experiences from his expatriation in Asia, Jan did departure from known experiences. He had earlier been working in different companies, each of them with very strong but also very different corporate cultures. He explained that he found useful analogies between his experiences with different corporate cultures and his experiences with different working cultures between Denmark and Asia. His former experiences were used to create a sphere of implications which help him to make the unfamiliar and unintelligible experience comprehensible by meta-cognitive operations. This capacity is very important in regard to the experience of differences. In our material we can establish the relationship between the capacities to handle differences and the interviewees’ level of meta-cognition.

Motivations and meta-cognition.

Now, meta-cognition and learning have been discussed since the time of Socrates, what lacks is a more profound discussion of why some of us generate meta-cognition from specific unfamiliar experiences, and others do not. In order to become culturally intelligent, exposure to other and unfamiliar cultures have often been seen as the answer. Considering the companies needs of employees with these capacities, expatriation has often been the solution. Notably, you could say that expatriation might create an environment full of unfamiliar experiences, gaps and feelings of loss, thus, as described above, the most motivating learning situation. Nevertheless, this is not the case. As one of our interviewees, Lisbeth an earlier expatriated and now HR-manager, from Company 2, states;” We can easily meet people, who were expatriated and who hated it all the way through, who never dined with any of the locals or what ever... so they haven’t learned anything by it” Also Peter from Company 3, an earlier expatriated and now HR-manager in one of the companies largest and most diverse regions, from company 3 points at this problems;” There are many people, who have many international experiences – hard-core business experiences – but they often face problems. And it is not because they haven’t been abroad half of their life time, but they seem to miss empathy”. The literature as well states the paradox that implacable and distorting experiences sometimes reinforce instead of altering cultural stereotypes (Mezirov 1997:7, Blasco 2009).

To explain the different outcome, parts of the cultural intelligence research presumes that it is to a certain extent a question of personality (Earley 2002, Earley& Anc 2003, Earley and Peterson 2004), and thereby indicates that the

² All names are fictive in regard the anonymity of our interviewees.

recruitment process is essential for acquiring employees capable of handling differences. Other parts of the literature indicate that certain skills are needed in order to generate meta-cognition (Thomas 2008, Thomas et al., 2008). Thus, for this perspective training of skills becomes crucial. In our interviews we also questioned the interviewees about what they found most important in order to handle differences, and the answers were diverse. As Jens from Company 4 stated empathy is an important capacity, as well as openness and sensibility, and as Gleen from Company 3, a former engineer from abroad, now a trainer at the academy, stated;” So I think ... my knowledge on culture is about being aware. It’s not *knowing* all the cultures.I don’t think it’s so much about *really knowing* everything. It’s more about being aware and being *open* of it”. In general, our interviewees states as well as Jan from Company 1;”...You need to look at the people you’re dealing with, and ..well, I think it is commonsense and ordinary politeness, but it is also a question of tact... In general, it is the interest in how people do things and how they do it in each their way”. While these statements are heard many times before with regard to cultural competences or cultural sensibility, I will argue, that our interviewees answers’ also reflect the ability to handle the unknown without a pre-described explanation.

Culture and meta-cognition

Therefore, we need to return to the discussion of readiness to falsify and alter the current used frame, indicating that the available identity positions are an important factor in regard to what extend willingness to experience loss and change of identity is present (Egholm Feldt 2009). For that reason, the context and following its available social identity positions, wherein the employees handle the unfamiliar experiences delimit or generate possibilities to create abductions. Consequently, the motivation for creating meta-cognition and abduction in regard to handling of differences and unfamiliar experiences are connected with identity positions not predefined and thus changeable. Accordingly, identity is defined in relation to flexible transnational as well as trans-cultural communities involving various modes of boarder crossing. The identities are established in relation to “*a community of shared meanings that are constructed in the process of a group or an organization trying to define themselves and their actual situation*” (Søderberg, 1999: 163). The demarcation of a community is therefore always ongoing and changeable in regard to its relations within different contexts. Culture, as a consequence, is seen as something we *do* and *use*.

Some parts of the research about cultural intelligence operate with a national definition of culture and communities as an underlying assumption (Earley 2002, Earley & Anc 2003, Thomas et al. 2008, se also Thomas et al. testing program). Alongside these assumptions is a parallel trend towards discussing meta-cognition as the clever way to obtain your goals without the need to alter your identity. I will argue that from this perspective, superficial adaption becomes a crucial instrument to handle cultural encounters.

Cultural encounters, an obstruct for encounters?

Cultural encounters always involve at least two parts representing each their culture. In a cultural encounter you do not meet the single individual, but the individual as a representation of a specific community often defined by their nation (Egholm Feldt 2009). As stated before, an individual always bears knowledge and loyalty to many different communities at the same time, and identity positions are always selected in regard to the changeable context. In a cultural encounter the identity position is frozen in a form exclusively defined by the differences in regard to the other

part (Egholm 2006, Egholm Feldt 2009). Hence, culture encounters often depart from the notion of culture as something we *are* as well as they reinforce the distinctness of our (national) identities.

Notably, this leaves no room for understanding and dealing with a multitude of flexible similarities and differences. Never the less, business contexts to day involve a still growing global component, both in regard to a corporate culture and strategy in Multi National Companies but also in everyday practice where global encounters are frequent. Further more; adaption to a somewhat predefined culture has seemed to be an unhelpful instrument in regard to control the subsidiaries. Adaption is a way to disguise control and power relations. However, even the most subtle power relations and domination will always create some kind of resistance.

Concluding remarks.

Global encounters involve encounters with a multitude and diversity of communities and identities at the same time, thus undermining the stability of demarcation borders. When culture is considered something we *do* and *use*, it is not possible to predefine a culture. Accordingly, it is not possible to establish an already useful frame of knowledge to explain potential unfamiliar experiences. As business and multicultural companies grow even more global we need to acknowledge that the unfamiliar experiences are unknown to us. Thus, meta-cognition is required in order to make sense of the unknown differences. Meta-cognition or abduction, as Peirce would call the cognitive procedure, is motivated by the acceptance of uncertainty and thus a flexible identity position, where the opportunity to learn by failures are stimulated. Accordingly, we need to question both whether a business context has any interested in and further more, are able of providing contexts, which generate meta-cognition.

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