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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The ability to communicate, in one's own L1 or in L2 or with a lingua franca with people of different cultures, is more and more essential and required for work and in social relations. At the same time, the mobility of university students involved in study-abroad programs is constantly growing (OECD, 2011), in order to give global scope to academic education. Interculturalism and development of the cross-cultural skills needed to live in our global world are phrases that are frequently heard today. This contribution aims to reflect on the concept of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and on how it can be best developed during a study-abroad experience, concluding with the presentation of some targeted teaching strategies. The theoretical premises are the model of intercultural communicative competence proposed by Byram (1997) and taken up by Balboni (1999, 2007); Kolb's experiential learning (1984); and Hofstede's model of cultural dimensions (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010), taken out of its original context of business studies to become a teaching tool that can foster the development of ICC.

## **2. EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND THE STUDY-ABROAD EXPERIENCE**

The learning model on which these strategies for developing intercultural communicative competence are based is referred to Kolb's experiential learning (1984), according to which knowledge is developed through the observation and transformation of experience, in a cyclical process made up of four phases: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation (figure 1).

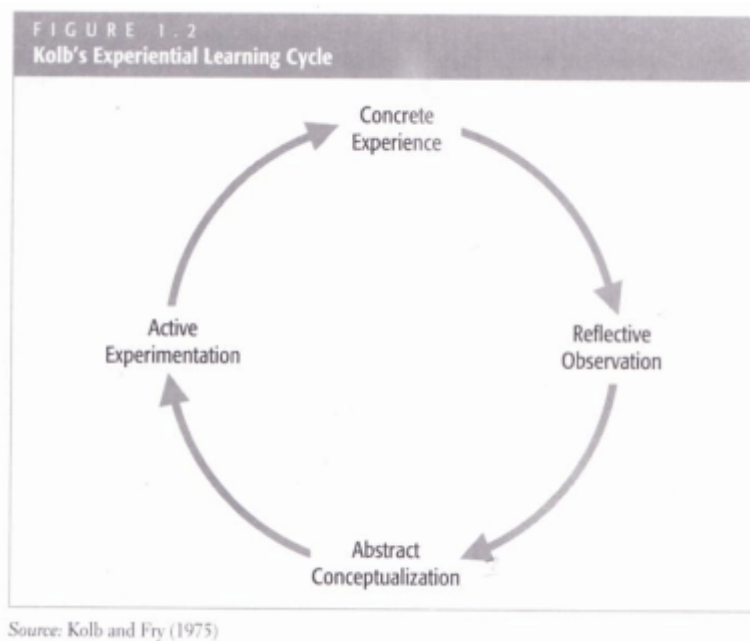


Figure 1: The cycle of experiential learning (original figure in Kolb & Fry 1975, as found in Sweitzer & King, 2009: 11)

In experiential learning the learner is involved as a whole person, including cognitive aspects and emotive, empathetic and relational features. For this reason the aims, methods and results of learning are not standardized and equal for all learners; on the contrary, they are very personal and close to the needs of each individual (Borgioli & Manuelli, 2013). For learning to take place, it is necessary for learners to be active participants in the learning process, rather than passive receivers of information supplied by the teacher (Sweitzer & King, 2009). Real learning happens when learners have concrete experience in the field, reflect on it and connect it to their prior knowledge, then go on to develop their own abstract hypotheses, which they actively verify, thus starting up Kolb's cycle once again.

In the research project that this contribution is based on, the experience of studying abroad, or rather the many single parts of this experience, are seen as the first phase of the experiential learning cycle; targeted didactic activities (for example, the intercultural diary, analyzed below) foster reflective observation; and abstract conceptualization is stimulated by the work done in class

and the teaching materials adopted. Finally, the course requirements, necessary in an academic course, are used as moments of reflection and assessment of the learner's personal, professional and civic growth.

Actually, the connection between the experience of studying abroad and experiential learning is not new, as shown by Hopkins 1999; since that time it has been studied, analyzed and put into practice (Jackson, 2015), above all in the English-speaking world where this learning method was developed (Borgioli & Manuelli, 2013). The potential inherent in the relationship between experiential learning and the development of communicative competence has also been discovered and used successfully in Europe, for example in the project CROMO (*CROSSborder MOdule*, a cross-border intercultural module), which aims at contributing to unite bordering communities in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Carinthia (Austria) and Slovenia (Mariani, 2009).

### **3. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE**

The model of communicative competence developed by Byram (1997) and subsequently taken up by Balboni (1999, 2007) constitutes the reference model for the research project that this contribution is based on. According to Byram (1997) intercultural communicative competence, defined as the ability of individuals to interact with people from other countries and cultures in a foreign language, is made up of five *savoirs* that do not necessarily result from learning directly connected to linguistic learning: *savoir être*, *savoirs*, *savoir comprendre*, *savoir apprendre/faire*, and *savoir s'engager*. The complete model as formulated by Byram (Figure 2) integrates intercultural communication, defined in terms of objectives or *savoirs*, with communicative competence, integrated with the concepts of "discovery", "interpretation" and "relationship-building", and establishes the locations where this competence is developed.

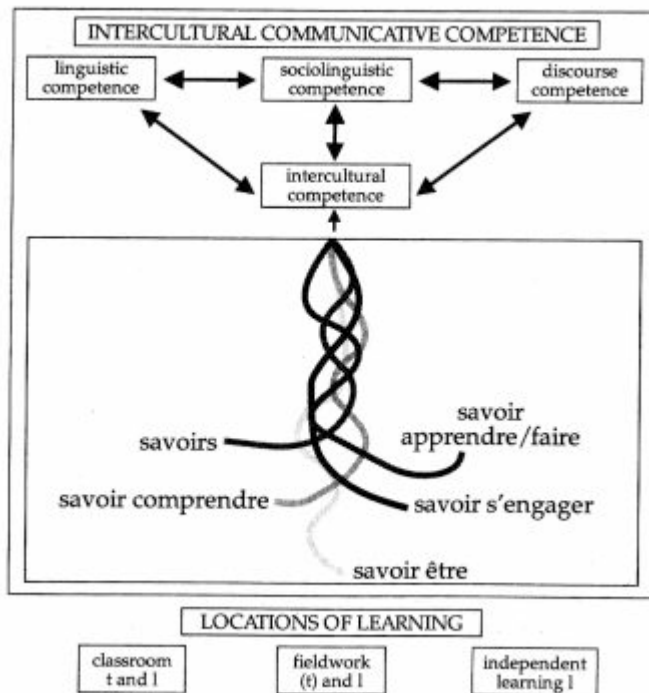


Figure 2: Complete model of intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997: 73)

Intercultural communicative competence differs from intercultural competence, defined as the ability to interact in one's own language with people of different cultures and countries, in that it is more complex and allows the individual to interact effectively in a larger number of situations. This new model of competence derives from the need to reconsider the aims of language teaching caused by the social changes created by globalization and internationalization (Byram & Zarate, 1996; Byram, 2008). The concept of "intercultural speaker" is introduced and substitutes that of "native speaker" as a model of language learning. As a consequence of this change, the concept of communicative competence must also be revised. According to Byram (1997) the success of the interaction between intercultural speakers can be assessed not only in terms of effective exchange of information (an aspect that already characterizes communicative competence), but also in terms of success in establishing and maintaining human relationships. The intercultural speaker is a subject in evolution who wants to live in a complicated world made up of values and beliefs that can be seen and understood from different points of view. This subject is ready to ask, explore, compare, analyze and reflect, thereby becoming a person with critical

capacities, aware that his/her own formation may be incomplete and needs to be updated continually (Copeiras Aguilar, 2009).

According to Balboni, intercultural competence, and consequently also the intercultural communicative competence that constitutes its more complex state, cannot be taught as such. Instead, we can “teach how to observe it [...] on the basis of a model that guides and gives structure to observation” (Balboni, 2012: 148). This model includes “software of the mind”, a concept formulated by Hofstede in his research on cultural differences (1980, 1991, 2001; Hofstede, Pedersen & Hofstede, 2002; Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). Hofstede’s work is considered fundamental in preparing effective strategies for developing intercultural communicative competence, and this research project intends to measure its impact in that sphere. If it is understood and utilized well, Hofstede’s research on intercultural differences, which led to the definition of the concept of “software of the mind” and the development of the cultural dimensions model, can constitute a highly useful instrument for comparing cultures on a solid scientific basis. Indeed, many models of intercultural competence, including those of Byram (1997) and Balboni & Caon (2014), envisage a comparison between different cultures.

#### **4. COMPARING CULTURES**

In order to observe and compare cultures we need to have an objective tool that can support the intercultural learner in his/her correct understanding of the context in which intercultural communication takes place and of all the cultures involved. To this end, studies on intercultural analysis can be of help. The awareness that there are people with different values, beliefs and life styles has existed since the dawn of civilization, even if cultural anthropology as an autonomous discipline that studies cultures and cultural differences was not born until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At that time it consisted mainly in the study of exotic tribes living in remote parts of the planet, carried on by European and American scholars. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, cultural anthropology developed the idea that all societies face the same essential problems, and only the answers are different. Since then scholars have become convinced that this concept is also valid for modern societies, and there is a growing interest in the comparison of different cultures, for example in the fields of cultural anthropology, intercultural psychology and international management. This new interest is obviously stimulated and nourished by increasing globalization and the ever more frequent contacts of industrialized countries with citizens of developing countries.



Comparing cultures presents various problems. This is also the case because there is no real agreement in the academic community about the meaning of the word “culture” or the definition of the concept itself (for a summary of the various definitions and conceptualizations, see Minkov, 2013), with all the consequences this brings for the development of research involving the concept, including the study of cultural differences. The question of the validity of the concept of “national culture” is still open and is a source of heated academic discussion (Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Smith, 2004; House & Javidan, 2004; Peterson & Smith, 2008; Minkov & Hofstede, 2012). In his recent exhaustive manual of intercultural analysis, in which he starts out from the analysis of the various conceptualizations of culture and the methods and techniques for studying cultures and ends up with a detailed critique of the most important cultural studies carried out until now, Minkov suggests, “we should stay open to diverse conceptualizations of culture, provided that they are clearly explained by their proponents and make sense to others.” (Minkov, 2013:16). For this reason, we feel that the ideal instrument for observing and comparing cultures for the purpose of developing CCI is to be found in “hologistic comparisons of national culture characteristics for the identifications of recurrent patterns or structures” (Minkov, 2013: 2), where the term “hologistic” refers to a large-scale analysis simultaneously involving different societies, possibly from all over the world. By “recurring patterns or structures” is meant relations among variables and distances among cases that can be repeated and confirmed in different studies.

Following Minkov (2011), we decided not to use studies on cultural differences based essentially on the author’s subjective perceptions, that is, studies not based on objective proof deriving from scientific research, as they were not considered appropriate for developing CCI. Moreover, studies focusing on specific features of single cultures are not used, since such studies make it impossible to compare different cultures. The choice to use large-scale intercultural analyses to compare different cultures implies the acceptance of an “operationalist” definition of culture (Minkov, 2011). According to this purely empirical approach, culture, intelligence and other similar scientific constructs are defined by the instruments used to measure them and by the various external phenomena statistically associated with them. For a more precise definition of “operationalism” see House & Hanges 2004, and for its application to intercultural analysis see Minkov 2011 and 2013. However, we should keep in mind that for the purpose of this study we need only verify that the instruments chosen to observe and compare cultures are the result of rigorous scientific research, rather than impressionistic observations of scholars or journalists. Another consequence of this methodological choice is that the observation of cultures is based on measurable cultural elements, such as values, beliefs and norms, which can be studied using pertinent questionnaires. The subsequent statistical analysis of these questionnaires leads to the definition of cultural dimensions.

“A dimension is an aspect of a culture that can be measured relative to other cultures” (Hofstede et al., 2010: 31). Hofstede et al. (2010) maintain that since “values [...] are the stable elements in culture, comparative research on culture starts from the measurements of value” (28). We are aware that this approach and consequent methodological choice entail some controversial issues, such as: the difficulty of writing adequately non-culturally-oriented questionnaires (Chinese Culture Connection, 1987); the complexity of the statistical analysis of the results of the questionnaires (very well explained in Minkov 2011 and further developed in Minkov 2013); the validity of the concept of “national culture” (Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Peterson & Smith, 2008); the importance and difficulty of consistently remaining at the chosen level of analysis (individual level, group level, institutional level) (Bennett, 2013); and the difficulty of quantifying the weight of individual differences compared to cultural differences (Hofstede et al., 2010).

Hofstede himself is aware of the controversial issues generated by the comparison of different cultures, and he deals with this matter systematically and pragmatically to reach coherent solutions that allow him to consolidate his research (see, for example, the case of the features and reciprocal relations among concepts like “society”, “nation”, “country” and “culture”). Since 1991 Hofstede has affirmed that “strictly speaking, the concept of a common culture applies to societies, not to nations” (Hofstede et al, 2010: 21). He goes on to explain that he uses classifications by nation only for pragmatic reasons (“it is often the only feasible criterion for classification”): “using nationality as a criterion is a matter of expediency, because it is immensely easier to obtain data for nations than for organic homogeneous societies. Nations as political bodies supply all kinds of statistics about their populations” (Hofstede et al., 2010: 21). Despite the aspects of the analysis of cultural differences that remain controversial and unresolved, of which we are well aware, we feel that it is fundamental for intercultural research to continue to investigate these problems and propose operative solutions. What is more, we are convinced that the models of comparison of cultures deriving from this research, in particular Hofstede’s national cultural dimensions, can prove a precious tool for developing CCI in intercultural learners, providing that they are used with full awareness of their characteristics and limits.

Minkov (2013) lists and analyses 27 large intercultural studies that report national cultural dimensions, in which the definition of ‘large studies’ is attributed on the basis of the fact that they involve at least 20 countries of different continents and have been peer-reviewed and published in important journals or in monographs published by well-known publishers. According to many scholars the greatest impact has been made by Hofstede’s work (Kirkman, Lowe e Gibson, 2006), to the degree that even many authors of similar studies, who are therefore in a certain sense his

competitors, recognize its fundamental importance (Trompenars 1993 ). Hofstede's research has inspired many other studies: he has become the most widely quoted intercultural analyst in the world, and in 2008 he was included in the Wall Street classification of the most influential business thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Minkov, 2011). As regards our research, as early as 1999 Balboni held the definition of the concept of software of the mind developed by Hofstede (1991) to be fundamental for the development of CCI. This undoubtedly guided and influenced our choice of Hofstede's model as a tool for developing the CCI of study-abroad students in Italy, who personally experience national level intercultural encounters in which the linguistic factor is involved.

#### **4.1 THE MODEL OF CULTURAL DIMENSIONS**

The model of national cultural dimensions developed by the Dutch scholar Geert Hofstede (1980, 1991, 2001; Hofstede et al., 2002; Hofstede et al, 2010) is an objective reference model for observing and comparing different cultures. Hofstede analyzed job related values in over 116,000 questionnaires of employees from branches of IBM in roughly 70 countries and in 20 languages between 1967 and 1969, and again between 1971 and 1973. Through a statistical analysis of the results of these questionnaires, Hofstede constructed four cultural dimensions that can be used to explain a large number of cultural differences. The fundamental innovation of Hofstede's analysis was the approach and development of these dimensions (Minkov 2013: 205), as well as his analysis of data focused on societies rather than individuals, on national cultures rather than on personality. The first study, *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values*, dates to 1980. In 1991 he published a new book, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, which is a non-academic book meant for all those who interact with people of different cultures. In 2001 a new updated edition of *Culture's Consequences* appeared, with a discussion of the numerous replies that had been published from 1980 on. In 2005 Hofstede published a new edition of *Cultures and Organizations. Software of the Mind* with his son, Gert Jan. Since his first intercultural studies, Geert Hofstede has continued to explore alternative data sources and to integrate his original data bank of IBM employees. The third and latest edition of *Cultures and Organizations, Software of the Mind. Intercultural Cooperation and Its Importance for Survival* came out in 2010. It was written not only in collaboration with his son Gert Jan, but also with the scholar Michael Minkov, whose research on cultural values (Minkov, 2007) inspired the introduction of the sixth national cultural dimension. It is interesting to note that the Italian translation of this text appeared in 2014, offering further confirmation of the timeliness and validity of the model.

Well aware of the academic controversy about the definition of culture, Hofstede chooses the social-



anthropological definition, according to which by the term “culture” we mean all the ways of thinking, feeling and acting learned throughout our lives. This definition includes not only activities aimed at improving the mind, such as literature and art, but also ordinary everyday acts, such as greeting people, eating, and showing or not showing feelings. In this sense, culture is always a collective phenomenon, comprising the unwritten rules of the social game. Drawing an analogy with the way computers work (we should not forget that Hofstede’s research started in the second half of the 20th century), Hofstede maintains that culture is “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others” (Hofstede et al. 2010: 6). This approach to culture as a reply to the unwritten rules of the social game undoubtedly offers many advantages for the intercultural learner living, or better “sojourning”, in a foreign country (we refer here to the distinction made by Byram (1997) between “tourist” and “sojourner”). In their most popular book, Hofstede, Pedersen and Hofstede maintain that cultures are “adaptations of a people to the conditions of life” (2002: 34), and that while all cultures face the same fundamental problems of social life identified by 19<sup>th</sup>-century sociologists, every culture has developed its own answers to each problem.

These fundamental common problems with solutions varying from culture to culture revealed by the statistical analysis of the data of the IBM survey are (Hofstede et al, 2010: 30):

- Social inequality, including the relationship with authority;
- The relationship between individual and group;
- The concepts of masculinity and femininity, understood as the social and emotive implications of being born man or woman;
- Ways of dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity, which have shown to be correlated with control of aggressiveness and the expression of emotions.

These four fundamental problematic areas defined by anthropologists and empirically found in Hofstede’s study represent the cultural dimensions, where dimension means “an aspect of a culture that can be measured relative to other cultures” (Hofstede et al, 2010: 31). These four dimensions have been called: Power Distance, (from small to great), Collectivism vs individualism, Femininity vs masculinity, and Uncertainty Avoidance (from weak to strong). After having examined another survey (Chinese Culture Connection, 1987), Hofstede developed the fifth cultural dimension, i.e., Long-term vs short-term orientation. In 2007, in collaboration with Minkov, another survey on values (World Values Survey, 2006) was examined, and a further national cultural dimension was developed, i.e., Indulgence vs Restraint. Thus we arrive at six national cultural dimensions

(summarized in figure 9, prepared for teaching purposes), which can be used to observe and compare different cultures and can offer intercultural learners, in this case study-abroad students in Italy, a useful objective reference model.

| <b>Fundamental Problem</b> | <b>Cultural Dimension</b>                   |
|----------------------------|---|
| Hierarchy                  | Power Distance (from small to great)        |
| Identity                   | Individualism vs collectivism               |
| Gender                     | Masculinity vs femininity                   |
| Truth                      | Uncertainty avoidance (from weak to strong) |
| Virtue                     | Short-term vs long-term orientation         |
| Happiness                  | Indulgence vs restraint                     |

In order to understand how a model like this can be used to develop the CCI of intercultural learners, and keeping in mind that this model is not well-known in applied linguistics, we present here below a brief summary of the cultural dimensions already published (Tarabusi, 2012); for greater detail, see Hofstede's original works. Each cultural dimension is briefly introduced and explained, although we are aware of the inevitable limits of such a concise presentation. Indeed, each dimension would require a great deal more time and attention, above all if we wished to go more deeply into the practical consequences of the differences of cultural

Figure 3: Scheme summarizing the six national cultural dimensions

dimensions and experience them in everyday life. Anyone who has lived abroad or has regular contacts with people of different cultures can find in these dimensions a key useful for understanding various episodes of their experience. We also want to note that since Hofstede's first publication of the 1980 study, researchers have used his framework of cultural values in a vast range of empirical studies, which has led to international discussion on the theme, as is evidenced in Kirkman et al. (2006), in which 180 published studies are analyzed.

**Power Distance** (from small to great). Anthropologists hold that there is inequality in every society, even in the simplest group of hunter-gatherers. The fundamental problem at stake here is hierarchy, i.e. the degree of inequality among people considered to be a natural state of things by the members of that group, or better, of that culture. Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov define the distance from power as "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (2010: 61). Using a statistical analysis of the data of the IBM questionnaire, Hofstede calculated an index of power distance (Power Distance Index, PDI), with values ranging from roughly 0 for a country with little power distance to roughly 100 for a country with great power distance. Due to the way they were calculated, the

scores represent relative positions and not absolute ones, as they only measure differences; this is true for all six dimensions. The data originally based on the IBM survey and relative to fifty countries and three regions have subsequently been calculated by replications or on the basis of informed estimates for seventy-five countries and regions. Malesia and Slovakia have the greatest power distance, with a PDI score of 104, while Austria has the smallest (PDI = 11). Italy (PDI = 50) has a power distance greater than the United States (PDI = 40).

**Collectivism vs individualism.** The second fundamental problem that cultures have to face is identity, that is, the relationship between the individual and the group. "Individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between the individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after him- or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism as its opposite pertains to societies in which people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange of unquestioning loyalty" (Hofstede et al, 2010: 92). The values of the index of individualism (IDV), which represent the relative positions of countries, range from close to 0 for the most collectivistic country to 100 for the most individualistic. The cultures of the richest countries in the world are relatively individualistic, while those of poorer countries are relatively collectivistic. Thus, collectivism can be seen as an adaptation to poverty and limited resources, and individualism to wealth and abundant resources. The United States is the most individualistic culture (IDV = 91), Guatemala (IDV = 6) the most collectivistic. Italy is in eighth position (IDV = 76), the first among the countries of southern Europe. In this case, too, American students living in Italy for an academic semester can find an objective explanation not based on stereotypes for behaviors that might otherwise seem strange or incomprehensible.

**Femininity vs masculinity.** The third fundamental problem concentrates on gender roles and control of aggressiveness. It has been found that an unequal distribution of roles between men and women coincides with a harsher society, in which there is more stress on success and struggle than on care and compromise. Hofstede et al. (2010) uses the following definition, "A society is called *masculine* when emotional gender roles are clearly distinct: men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success, whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life. A society is called *feminine* when emotional gender roles overlap: both men and women are supposed to be modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life" (140). The most masculine country is Slovakia (MAS = 110), the most feminine Sweden (MAS = 5).

**Uncertainty avoidance** (from weak to strong). The fourth fundamental problem is how people in a

culture deal with what is unpredictable or ambiguous. It is linked to fear of the unknown: extreme ambiguity creates unbearable anxiety, and every human society has developed models to alleviate this anxiety, which belong to the domains of technology, law and religion. Anxiety and the search for Truth are closely connected; this dimension could have been called orientation towards a single truth against orientation towards many truths. "Uncertainty avoidance can therefore be defined as the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations" (Hofstede et al 2010: 191). This sensation can be expressed by nervous stress and the need for written and unwritten rules. The values of the avoidance of uncertainty index (UAI) for the 76 countries in the original study go from roughly 0 for the countries with the weakest uncertainty avoidance (Singapore, UAI = 8) to roughly 100 for the strongest avoidance (Greece, UAI = 112). For our research it is interesting to note that the data on the structure of the language show that the languages of the cultures with the strongest uncertainty avoidance often have different ways of addressing different people, for example by using the formal "lei" or informal "tu" in Italian. From the time they are small, children who learn these languages face different choices on the basis of rigid cultural rules. By contrast, languages in cultures with weaker uncertainty avoidance tend to have fewer rules of this type. It is also interesting to note that students from countries with strong uncertainty avoidance (such as Italy) expect their teachers to be the experts who have all the answers, and in these cultures teachers who use cryptic academic language are respected. On the contrary, students from countries with weaker uncertainty avoidance (like the United States) accept a teacher who says "I don't know", and their respect goes to teachers who use simple language and books that explain difficult questions in ordinary terms. And here we can see a potential intercultural misunderstanding between teachers belonging to cultures with strong uncertainty avoidance, who tend to use cryptic academic language, and students belonging to cultures with weak uncertainty avoidance, who appreciate simple language, as is the case with Italian university professors and university students from the United States (Italy's UAI = 75, U.S. UAI = 46, which means that Italy has stronger uncertainty avoidance than the United States). It is interesting that cultural differences observed in a school environment are the object of one of Hofstede's first works (1986).

**Long-term vs short-term orientation.** The fundamental problem at stake here is the choice between present and future virtue. The question of virtue is particularly important in Asia, and this explains why non-Asians find it difficult to understand this cultural concept. Europeans and Americans are more interested in truth (therefore in avoidance of uncertainty), while Asians are more interested in virtue. This fifth dimension was added later, after Hofstede had integrated the results of the Chinese Culture Connection (1987) into his model. One problem with this new



dimension is that originally the scores were available only for twenty-three countries (Italy excluded), with 16 being added later in the 2005 edition, following replications and extrapolations. Through a further analysis of the World Values Survey carried out by Minkov in 2007, the long-term orientation index (LTO) was calculated for 93 countries (including Italy). Here is the definition: “long-term orientation stands for the fostering of virtues oriented toward future rewards - in particular, perseverance and thrift. Its opposite pole, short-term orientation, stands for the fostering of virtues related to the past and present - in particular, respect for tradition, preservation of ‘face’, and fulfilling social obligations” (Hofstede et al, 2010: 239). The scores for the orientation index go from 100 (South Korea, long-term oriented) to 0 (Puerto Rico, short-term oriented).

**Indulgence vs Restraint.** The sixth national cultural dimension was added in 2010 as a result of collaboration with Minkov in his research based on the World Values Survey (2006). This dimension proposes to measure a culture’s happiness, otherwise defined as Subjective Well-Being, SWB). Research on cultural differences in SWB shows a high level of stability in the classification of countries. The definition that Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov propose is as follows, “Indulgence stands for a tendency to allow relatively free gratification of basic and natural human desires relating to enjoying life and having fun. Its opposite pole, restraint, reflects a conviction that such gratification needs to be curbed and regulated by strict social norms” (Hofstede et al, 2010: 281). The scores of the indulgence vs restraint index (IVR) vary from 100 for the most indulgent, that is to say the happiest (Venezuela), to 0 for the culture with the greatest restraint, that is the least happy (Pakistan). The United States (IVR = 68) comes out as more indulgent, and happy, than Italy (IVR = 30, in 66<sup>th</sup> place out of 93). According to Hofstede et al. (2010), Indulgence vs restraint seems to be the most important factor for predicting birthrate, more explicative than educational level or national wealth. This observation could offer an interesting explanation of Italy’s extremely low birthrate. This is a new dimension, still not thoroughly researched in scientific literature and deserving of further study.

Each of the national cultural dimensions is correlated by examples taken from daily life, which study-abroad students can observe and experience personally during their study-abroad period. This aspect makes Hofstede’s model easy to use in our context, along with the fact that the cultural differences have been put into only six easily understood and manageable dimensions (more complex and sophisticated models are very difficult to use outside of a strictly academic context). Moreover, the fact that this research is deeply rooted in the theoretical work of sociologists and anthropologists, and that it is based on a rigorous statistical analysis of samples representative of roughly 100 cultures on all five continents supports our choice to use it as an instrument for

developing CCI.

In order to use the model of national cultural dimensions to develop the CCI of study- abroad students, it is also necessary to understand how this model was born. Cultural differences manifest themselves in various ways, and Hofstede decided to analyze those that derive from differences in values, considering that values, along with symbols, heroes and rituals, are able to represent the concept of culture quite clearly (Hofstede et al., 2010: 7), as we see here below in the well-known “onion” diagram (Figure 10).

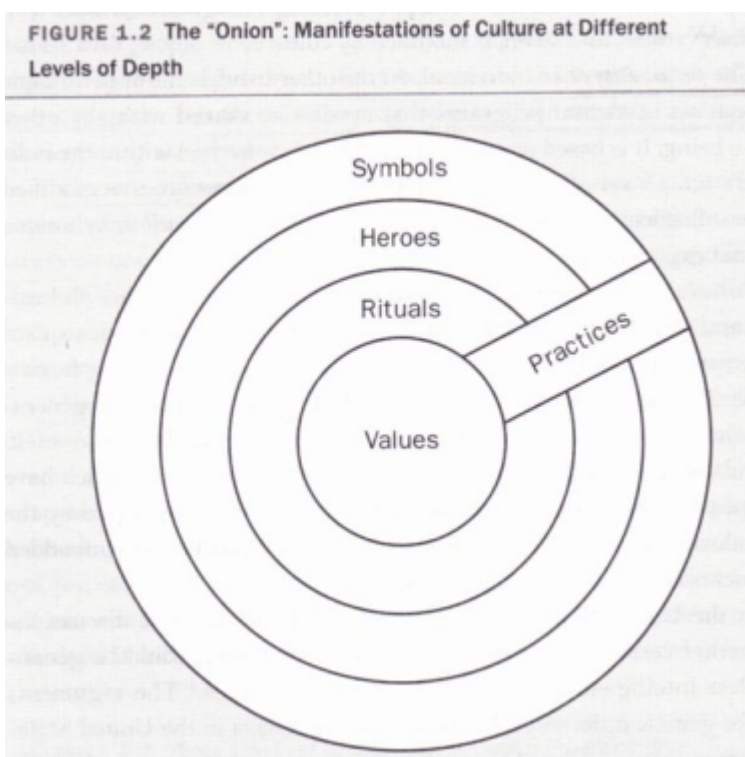


Figure 4: Hofstede et al., 2010: 8

Values are acquired early in life, and for this reason many of them do not emerge at a conscious level. Consequently, such values cannot be discussed or directly observed; they can only be deduced from the way people act in various circumstances. A system that aims to observe and compare different cultures can therefore start with the measurement of the values that compose them. A classic method for measuring values is to administer questionnaires in which people express their preferences among various alternatives, thereby allowing deep values to surface. Despite the fact that the interpretation of the responses involves various problems, whose solution, as we have already said, is not the direct object of our research, these questionnaires give useful information, in that they show the differences in responses among the groups or categories interviewed. Through the processing of the responses to the questionnaire on values, Hofstede noticed certain recurrent responses

among people belonging to the same culture which could not be considered casual. The sample of the people interviewed had characteristics that enabled it to be considered representative of their different cultures. This study allowed Hofstede to arrive at the definition of “software of the mind”, meaning by this the sum of ways of thinking, feeling and acting that have been acquired throughout a person’s life, the majority of which are acquired in early childhood (Hofstede et al., 2010). The sources of this software are found in the social environment in which one has been raised: family, school, territory, youth groups and workplace all contribute to the development of this software. According to Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov “a person’s behaviour is only partially predetermined by his or her mental programs [...] The software of the mind [...] only indicates what reactions are likely and understandable, given one’s past” (2010: 5) (figure 11).

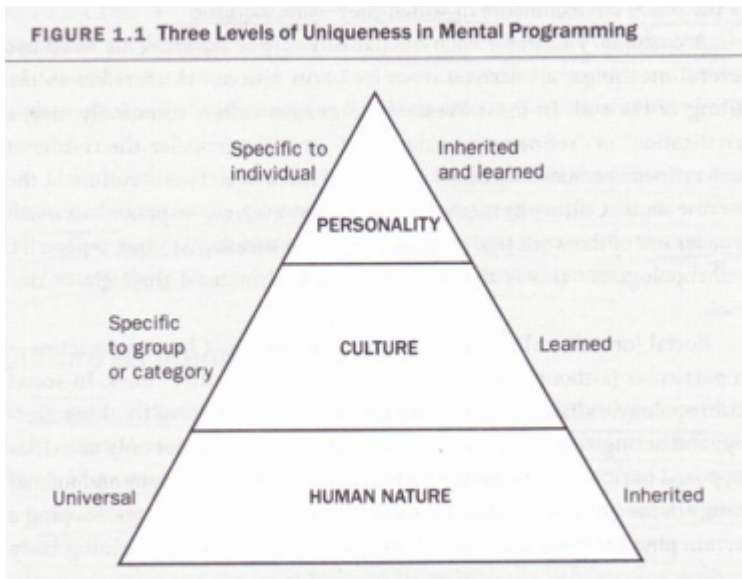


Figure 5: Hofstede et al., 2010: 6

Since 1991 Hofstede maintains that the acquisition of intercultural communication capacity goes through three phases, “awareness, knowledge and skills”, Hofstede et al, 2010: 358).

## 5. STRATEGIES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

We shall now present some strategies that have been devised keeping in mind the above theoretical premises. These strategies were employed with U.S. college students studying abroad in Italy, whose competence was at least at B1 level of the CEFR. The activities proposed are aimed at developing the first two phases identified by Hofstede, awareness and knowledge; the fact that the learners are sojourning in Italy allows them to put into practice what they have learned in class in order to develop *skill*, the third and last element of the sequence proposed by Hofstede (Hofstede et al., 2010). If appropriately utilized, the intercultural learners’ experience in Italy (that is, in a different culture where a language different from their L1 is spoken) constitutes the first phase of Kolb’s experiential learning cycle - concrete experience. Thus, the purpose of the didactic activities is to foster the development of a process rather than the achievement of a standard result equal

for all the learners. Strategies are  
proposed:

- to develop awareness of values (individual, of one's own culture, of the other culture);
- to develop the ability to separate observation (of an event or a situation) from interpretation;
- to learn to observe cultures objectively.

The development of an awareness of values is the object of various disciplines. Here we refer to work and materials developed in the realm of Anglo-American social sciences as support for trainees, e.g. Sweitzer & King, 2009. The learning materials available are abundant and varied, and can be adapted and well-integrated into courses of Italian L2. For example, the picture of the onion as representation of the various layers of culture (figure 4), as well as the picture of the iceberg that represents the visible and invisible aspects of culture, are commonly utilized. These pictures, with follow-up discussion, can be used as warm-up activities and to sensitize learners to cultural differences from the very start of their Italian L2 course.

The next phase involves fostering reflection on one's own individual values, with the aim of subsequently being able to develop reflection on the values of one's culture. This gradual realization (individual and then cultural) moves naturally towards awareness of the values of the other culture. In the Italian L2 classroom, it is advisable to do work aiming at enriching the lexicon referring to values, the expression of opinions and their discussion with classmates. In the case of American university students, who share a high-level knowledge of English, it can prove useful to assign as homework reading English-language texts on the concept and meaning of value (for example, in Sweitzer & King, 2009). This part on awareness of one's own values can finish with a class discussion or with a written composition, of the type, "Reconsider the values dealt with in class. How many of these values are important for you? Are there any values that are fundamental for you that are not listed? Which of these values do you think are important for your experience in Italy? What will you do if you meet someone who does not share these values"? It is important to stress that changing the last question to the past tense ("What did you do when you met ...") allows us to place ourselves in a position where we can listen and be open to students who want to talk about possible intercultural "incidents" they have observed or experienced personally. These "incidents" in fact provide the fundamental raw material to work on with Hofstede's cultural dimensions.

One of the most appropriate teaching strategies for developing the ability to separate observation (of an event or situation) from interpretation is keeping a diary of experiences based on personal



reflections and on the ability to integrate the theory studied in class with real-life experience. In this case it is interesting to adopt the “intercultural diary” format (Kohls & Knight, 1994), where the pages of the diary are divided into two columns: in the left-hand column the fact or event is described, while in the right-hand column thoughts, observations and feelings are noted down. This format allows students to learn to separate observation (of the fact) from interpretation (based on values that are very often deeply rooted, and which we are often initially unaware of), with the aim of strengthening awareness and so progressing in the development of intercultural communication according to the awareness - knowledge - skill sequence (Hofstede et al., 2010).

To learn to observe cultures objectively, the study of Hofstede’s national cultural dimensions is proposed (in this case, too, it is possible to adopt English-language texts, or alternatively material in Italian, if the linguistic level of the class permits). Hofstede’s model of national cultural dimensions is a valid reference framework for decoding everyday behaviors that can reveal cultural characteristics. The model is valid for all cultures, and once its use is learned it can be applied in all intercultural contexts. In this way the experience of studying in Italy comes to enrich the patrimony of transversal capacities and skills that are spendable in the relational, work and social spheres (Borgioli & Manuelli, 2013).

Once the foundations of the work have been laid (i.e., awareness of values, the intercultural diary, knowledge of the cultural dimensions), it is possible to set up a periodic appointment (weekly, bi-weekly, etc.) dedicated to the discussion of intercultural “incidents” directly experienced or even only observed, and to follow-up reflection in an intercultural key. Using Hofstede’s cultural dimensions as the reference model, the teacher takes on the role of guide and facilitator, without having to be the only source of information and explanation for the students, with all the advantages this gives. In order to further foster reflection on experience, a fundamental phase in Kolb’s experiential learning (1984), it may be useful to assign a written composition on the following theme: “Considering your experience in Italy up to now, which aspects of Italian culture can you identify as proof of greater power distance or a more collectivist culture”? Carrying out this task will evidence the learners’ ability to observe cultures, their awareness of cultural values, and their knowledge of the model of cultural dimensions along with their ability to apply this model to their own intercultural experience. A satisfactory development of this composition will indicate the acquisition of the ability to observe cultures which Balboni (2012) and Byram (1997) also speak of.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

After clarifying the potential inherent in the relationship between experiential learning and the

study-abroad experience, this contribution has analyzed the features of Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence, considering in particular the necessity, also found in other models, to observe and compare cultures in order to develop this competence. To this end it has been proposed to adopt Hofstede's cultural dimensions model as a teaching tool, using it as a reference model for objectively observing and comparing different cultures. Bearing in mind that his model arose and was developed in the sphere of economic studies, this contribution offers a brief presentation and explanation of the model, being fully aware of the limits of this presentation and referring to the original sources for a more complete understanding. Finally, we present some teaching strategies aimed at the development of CCI, conceived and adopted in Italian L2 courses at a minimum CEFR level of B1, held for U.S. college students studying abroad in Italy for one or two academic semesters.

The nature and purpose of this contribution allow us only a mere mention of the most important critical points requiring further research. These include the testing and assessment of intercultural communicative competence; ways to integrate CCI into Italian L2 courses, which involves redesigning teaching objectives for these courses; and the limits, well-known to Hofstede himself, of the model of national cultural dimensions.

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