

MASTEROPPGAVE

The use of Story Circles to promote intercultural competence and thereby benefit PhD students in their research

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Abstract

The UN sustainable development goals for 2030 require that individuals collaborate both locally and globally in research, and that they develop and implement changes that can benefit the world's population. To achieve such goals, individuals must improve their communication skills and strengthen their collaboration.

PhD students move to different countries to pursue their areas of expertise and research. For many it is the first time living abroad, adapting to a new host country, and working on international research projects with people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It is important that they gain knowledge about culture and intercultural competence to adapt and succeed as researchers.

This paper examines how Story Circles can promote intercultural competence and whether learning about culture knowledge and intercultural competence can benefit PhD students in their research.

International PhD students at the University of Gothenburg who had recently arrived in Sweden were invited to take part in a workshop called *Living in Sweden with a focus on intercultural competence*.

The workshop focused on teaching culture specific knowledge, culture general knowledge and intercultural competence with the use of a presentation and Story Circles.

A mixed method design was used with both quantitative and qualitative research. Surveys were carried out prior to the workshop, straight afterwards and interviews were carried out with 8 students one-month post-workshop.

Results indicate that the students gained cultural self-awareness and were able to view situations with a new perspective. Some students experienced a change in attitude and used intercultural competence and communication skills in both their private lives and in their research.

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1. Introduction

Students apply to PhD programmes globally, allowing their area of expertise to take them to places near and far from their home country. For some PhD students it is the first time that they live abroad and are exposed to other cultures. Suddenly they must adapt to a new environment, academic workplace, colleagues, and research projects. Parallel to focusing on their projects, they must learn about their host country's values, norms and communication style in order to adapt and make friends.

A great majority of these students are not only working abroad, but they are working on international research projects with colleagues from all over the world with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Most of these students are using English as a Second Language and are working with, and sometimes even teaching, others who also have English as a Second Language.

This study looks at the benefits of teaching incoming international students' culture specific knowledge about their host country, culture general knowledge, different communication styles and the attitudes and skills needed to become interculturally competent.

All students in this study are working directly or indirectly with one or more of the UN sustainable development goals (Appendix 2, Figure 1), which are to be achieved by 2030. To achieve the goal(s), people need to work across borders, thinking as global citizens, working locally and/or internationally. Collaborations can be achieved faster and more effectively if individuals learn more about each other's cultures, ways of thinking, behaving and forms of communication. By gaining this knowledge and intercultural attitudes and skills, the students acquire the competence to overcome cultural and communication challenges when working on mutual international projects.

The hypothesis for this study is that by offering an interactive workshop and Story Circles, giving students the possibility to gain knowledge about cultures, communication styles and intercultural competence the students can learn to change their perspectives, attain positive attitudes such as curiosity and open-mindedness and implement skills such as *Listening for*

*Understanding*¹ in their research. Such a workshop could be offered to incoming international students at universities all over the world.

This study is carried out with newly arrived international PhD students. The students were invited to take part in a workshop to learn about Living in Sweden with a focus on intercultural competence. The workshop was made up of both a presentation and Story Circles where students shared experiences with one another whilst practicing the skill of *Listening for Understanding*.

Surveys were carried out before the workshop to find out more about the students' backgrounds, exposure to other cultures and areas that they wished to learn more about for their settling in period. Another survey was carried out immediately after the workshop to find out what they had learned, and whether they could implement some of the knowledge and skills acquired into their work as researchers as well as in their private lives.

Interviews were conducted with several students one month after the workshop was concluded, in order to find out how the workshop had impacted them and whether they found it useful during their settling in period. It was also looked at whether their new knowledge of communication styles, knowledge of culture and intercultural competence helped them become more ethnorelative. The findings could then indicate whether culture knowledge and intercultural competence benefit them in their research.

¹ The intercultural skill practised during Story Circles (Deardorff, 2020).

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Culture and intercultural competence

For years, cultural researchers such as Hall (1977) have looked at the different aspects of culture and how culture is defined. Hall's cultural iceberg (Appendix 2, Figure 2) offers a visual image of the different elements of culture. The iceberg is split into two by the water level. The elements above the surface of the water refer to aspects of culture that are visible such as traditions, dress, customs, artefacts, behaviours, symbols, and heroes. These aspects of culture are relatively easy to learn about, even if a person is exposed to a culture only for a short period of time. Knowledge of these aspects of culture can be gained by international exchange students, who are in a host country for a year or less.

The elements beneath the surface of the water level are known as the invisible aspects of culture, such as world view, assumptions, beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, and values. These aspects take a longer time to grasp, understand and sometimes even accept.

Samovar, Porter, McDaniel and Roy (2017) state that values are at the core of all individuals, and reflect how a person was brought up, as well as the standards by which they live (p. 58). Values are the driving force behind all choices; from the way parents raise their children to how society forms its rules and regulations. Therefore, individuals gain values through their families and the communities they belong to. However, to make matters even more complex, individuals living in the same community do not automatically share the same family values.

A person's core values define their way of living; how they think, feel and act. As not everyone is raised to believe, think, and live in the same way, conflicts between people and cultures often arise when there is a clash of values.

Our values influence our perspectives and actions; therefore, individuals need to learn to understand themselves and why they act and communicate in a certain way. Individuals need to look at themselves first and understand who they are, where they are coming from and thus become aware of their core values. By doing this, they can analyse their own reactions, roots to their decision-making and means of communication. It then becomes easier for individuals to analyse a situation and their own response when confronted with a person, environment or situation that conflicts with their own values, beliefs, or worldview.

Middleton (2014) points out the importance of understanding your core, and how to flex (in other words, become flexible) in both your behaviour and beliefs according to context, to practice Cultural Intelligence (CQ). CQ is the ability to thrive in multiple cultures by crossing divides. Divides that may be linked to ethical issues, to gender, generation, sector or background. Middleton describes CQ as being the natural evolution from Intelligence Quotient (IQ) and Emotional Intelligence (EQ).

An individual's core is made up of everything from spirit and identity, to behaviour and environment (p. 52). The core is unique for each individual and holds personal, biased opinions. When faced with another cultural context, the individual needs to determine how flexible (flex) they can be, whilst staying true to themselves. Therefore, the line between the core and flex (Appendix 2, Figure 3) slides depending on the situation the person finds themselves in, and how flexible they can be when it comes to adapting to the situation. However, the stronger the core, the easier it is to flex without losing your identity (Middleton, 2014, p. 59).

The process of learning about one's own core and flex is a major part of the conscious knowledge that needs to be acquired to then understand one's level of adaptation and integration. Nobody can be completely flexible at all times, but it is important to gain the ability of self-awareness in specific situations and understand how little or much one can flex and why, thus understanding the re-percussion one's words and behaviour have on the communication or interaction within a given context.

Morreale, Spitzberg and Barge (2013) state that you need both content knowledge and procedural knowledge to be culturally competent. Content knowledge refers to understanding a situation and the language used during that situation, thus understanding the meaning of it. Procedural knowledge is then the ability to plan and practice content knowledge in specific situations.

Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002) state that intercultural competence is a combination of three components: knowledge, attitude, and skills in relation to values. Intercultural attitudes include openness, curiosity, and the ability to decentre. In other words, one is open to the fact that one's own values and beliefs are not always the only possible or right ones to live by. It is important to see our values and beliefs from another person's perspective for us to also see them objectively. Byram et al. highlight the importance of gaining knowledge about social

groups and their forms of interaction. Knowledge about different communication styles can prepare individuals for positive intercultural communication. During the process of gaining knowledge, they also learn about how they are perceived by others. Gaining such knowledge means that both parties communicating can avoid misunderstandings or resolve them when necessary.

Byram et al. argue that there are three types of skills that individuals need to learn and practice. The first is *interpreting and relating*. This is the ability to interpret, explain and relate documents or events from another culture to one's own. The second skill is called *discovery and interaction*. This is when an individual is able to interact/communicate with a person from another culture and gain new knowledge about that person's culture or cultural practice. During the communication, the individual should combine and implement their knowledge, attitude and skills for a positive interaction. The third and final skill is *critical cultural awareness*. This is when an individual can critically evaluate their own and other cultures and countries through criteria, perspectives, practices, and products (Byram et al., 2002, pp. 11-13).

Individuals need to feel enriched by learning about people from other cultures and to accept their values, perspective, and behaviour. It is impossible to gain knowledge about all cultures; therefore, one must have the skills to constantly gain new knowledge of cultures and cultural practices.

An individual's values and life experience teach them how to perceive the world. Perception is always selective, so individuals focus on specific information and filter out the rest. In other words, they see what they want to see or expect to see. As a result, it becomes hard for an individual to automatically change their perception and interpretation of a situation. (Samovar, Porter, McDaniel and Roy, 2015).

Bennett (2004) puts forth the Development Model for Intercultural Sensibility (DMIS) that focuses on six types of experiences that an individual can find themselves in. Each experience describes their perception, attitude and behaviour when faced with a new culture.

Denial, Defense and Minimization are part of the Ethnocentric stages. Ethnocentrism is when a person believes that their own culture is the only real culture and that it is superior to other cultures. *Acceptance, Adaptation and Integration* are part of the Ethnorelative stages.

Ethnorelativism is when an individual sees their own culture and other cultures in context and

can therefore assimilate and accept the differences. Everyone is equal, no matter their background (Bennett, 2004, pp. 62-70). An individual is always in one of the following stages, according to Bennett:

Denial: Individuals that are in denial only care about their own culture and show no interest in learning about other cultures. Their attitude is to ignore, to be condescending, mix up and in the worst case, show aggression towards people from other cultures.

Defence: Individuals in defence favour their own culture or their adopted culture. These individuals are more likely to stereotype and create an obvious divide between *Us* and *Them*, favouring the *Us* and looking negatively upon *Them*.

Minimization: Individuals that minimize do not believe in cultural differences. When faced with another culture, they pick up on the similarities, using their own culture as their reference point.

Acceptance: Individuals in the acceptance stage can see cultures, including their own as different yet equal. They accept the differences even if they do not agree with them.

Adaptation: Individuals in this stage can live in another cultural context whilst staying true to their core/self.

Integration: Individuals feel multicultural and can adapt to different cultures, whilst staying true to their core/self.

Although the stages are grouped under Ethnocentrism and Ethnorelativism, it does not mean that an individual will experience all the stages or transition through them. Individuals should try to identify what stage they are in at all times, in all situations and cultural contexts. This self-awareness can then lead to a change of their mindset and behaviour when necessary.

Thus, when people are confronted with a new culture, they will be able to analyse themselves and their reactions, behaviour, and communication, to make sure that they are behaving in an ethnorelative way.

An individual can understand themselves better by gaining knowledge about their culture and that of others. Studies have been carried out with the purpose of scanning cultures and dividing the values and behaviour of people from different cultures into dimensions. Between 1967-1973, Hofstede carried out an extensive study of IBM employees on how values in the

workplace are influenced by a country's culture. This study was followed by more research carried out by Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010). Their work resulted in the Six Dimensions of National Culture (Indices, table 1). Scores of these dimensions are listed for over 76 countries. These dimensions can still be used today to analyse and compare different countries and cultures, but they cannot be used to predict an individual's behaviour.

Five of the dimensions presented are as follows: *Power Distance* refers to the level of hierarchy within a group or society, and how it is accepted or nurtured. *Individualism vs. Collectivism* looks at the level of dependency in a group, and the care individuals give others. In individualistic societies individuals care for themselves and immediate family, compared to those in collectivist societies where there is stronger loyalty to close and extended family as well as the community. This dimension is strongly present in an individual's self-image defined by *I* or *We*. The *Masculinity vs. Femininity* dimension looks at whether a society is more masculine, competitive, achievement and reward driven, or whether it is more feminine with a tendency to focus on cooperation, caring for others and quality of life. The fourth dimension known as the *Uncertainty Avoidance Index* looks at the scale on which a society is uncomfortable with uncertainty about the future and the inability to control it. This index measures whether people in cultures with strong uncertainty avoidance strictly follow their beliefs and code of behaviour, and whether people in cultures with weak uncertainty avoidance focus on practice rather than principles. The final dimension is *Indulgence vs. Restraint*. This final dimension looks at to what extent members of a society allow themselves to have fun and enjoy life. Societies are then seen as either restraining or encouraging self-gratification (2010).

However, cultures change with time and younger generations alter their values, beliefs and behaviour, affecting different cultures. Therefore, culture is not static, it is evolving, making it complex to gain clear knowledge, projecting us back to Hall's (1977) iceberg and the way in which the complexity of cultural values is difficult to grasp.

2.2 Story Circles & Listening for Understanding

Deardorff (2020) compiled the UNESCO Manual for Developing Intercultural Competencies using Story Circles. The handbook gives a structured guide to the methodology and information about Story Circle pilots that have been carried out in several countries across the world.

During Story Circles, three to six participants are given an equal amount of time to share a personal life experience. Whilst sharing, they become vulnerable and whilst listening, they gain new cultural insight and understanding. As a result, all participants are equal, sharing and receiving. It is also important that the participants show mutual respect and openness for one another.

Listening for Understanding is a key factor of Story Circles. When a participant is sharing their narration, the others should practice the skill of *Listening for Understanding* as opposed to Listening for Responding or Judging. In other words, those listening should listen to the story with an open mind and try to understand the personal experience the narrator is sharing with them.

Story Circle facilitators must make sure that the Story Circles take place in a safe environment, that the goals are clearly presented, and that sufficient time is provided. Further, facilitators must see to it that there is a common language, that they inform participants about the importance of confidentiality and equality during the process, and finally, that they set aside time for reflection and debriefing at the end (Deardorff, 2020, p. 21).

The methodology can be used with groups of all ages and backgrounds. The aim is to improve interaction between people, improve their listening skills, connect despite differences, show mutual respect, empathy and to raise cultural self-awareness as well as awareness of others' cultures. Cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioural learning are part of the Story Circle process (pp. 13-14). The cognitive knowledge gained can then help individuals to deal positively when faced with future challenges.

Deardorff provides clear step-by-step instructions and includes examples of prompts that can be used to start the sharing of experience. However, in order for the experience to be positive for all attendees, the facilitators must be vigilant, observe and read the participants' facial expressions and body language, whilst not interfering physically or vocally with the groups.

By the end of a Story Circle, the aim is for the participants to feel more connected and for them to have practiced the following attitudes and skills: Cultural self-awareness, listening, respect, open-mindedness, empathy, cultural awareness of others and with cognitive reflection (p. 58).

When communicating, individuals often put forth an idea or point of view with the aim of convincing another person. This persuasive quality is put aside when the person's communication must focus on *Listening for Understanding* and not for Responding or Judging. Learning to listen can help individuals improve their conversation skills and the ability to take turns during a conversation (Hymes, 1972, p. 228).

2.3 English as a Lingua Franca

The English language has traditionally been divided into English as a Native Language (ENL), English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Bauer, 2002, p. 23). English is used as a Lingua Franca when it is the common language of interaction for people who are non-native English speakers.

The English varieties traditionally taught in most classrooms globally are British and American. However it is important that individuals understand that English is spoken in a multitude of ways and that it is advantageous to learn how to communicate with speakers from all three categories above, therefore there has been a shift to teaching and learning of varieties of English (Bauer, 2002). All English speakers should gain the linguistic and social competence to interact with native and non-native speakers from diverse social and cultural backgrounds in order to improve their communication skills.

Flognfeldt and Lund (2016, p. 269) state that there were approximately 400 million ENL speakers and the same number of ESL speakers. The fluency amongst the EFL speakers varies, however, as is clear, the number of EFL speakers surpasses that of ENL speakers.

International collaboration at university level takes place primarily in English. The majority of international PhD students coming to Sweden do not have English as their first language. Even though most Swedish academics are relatively fluent in English, it is not their mother tongue. Therefore, collaboration and teaching take place with English as a Lingua Franca. In other words, English is the common foreign language being used by all as a means of communication. The knowledge of multiple languages and intercultural competence does not automatically go hand-in-hand. Sewell (2012, p. 5) states that just because an individual is bi-lingual or multi-lingual, it does not mean that they are automatically interculturally competent. However, being interculturally competent does improve your communication skills.

Bieswanger (2008) describes how non-native English students would feel a sense of frustration when travelling and finding it hard to understand other English speakers, a frustration born out of the discrepancy between the English they learned at school and the English they heard during their travels (p. 28). The Story Circle helps individuals to actually see others, to see past appearances but also past accents, dialects, and fluency in a language. The Story Circle forces individuals to focus on the content and message being communicated, rather than the choice of words or correctness of the language. Individuals are exposed to different varieties of English and actively practice respect, open-mindedness, and empathy.

As previously mentioned (Bauer, 2002), the teaching of English has in recent years shifted from teaching primarily British and American English to teaching English as an International Language, focusing on different varieties of ENL and ESL. As a result, EFL students have less pressure to sound British or American. Instead, the focus is on communication. Students learn to talk about themselves, their communities and cultures using English as a common language (Xu, 2018, p. 104). The focus on communication can give students more confidence to speak and share their thoughts, ideas, and experiences. The Story Circles provide a platform for all students to speak and listen and thus be equal, no matter their linguistic backgrounds. The students start to practice their meta-cultural competence (p. 106), which is the ability to communicate their cultural conceptualizations during an intercultural communication experience.

The way in which a person communicates is defined by their culture. There are high and low context cultures. Low context cultures tend to have a more direct type of communication, compared to high context cultures that have a more indirect type of communication (Hall & Hall, 1990).

Direct communication in low context cultures tends to focus more on the words and what is said. The message tends to be clear and to the point, compared to indirect communication, where words are not everything. Indirect communication in high context cultures is also about body language, gestures, facial expression, relationships and the unsaid. Therefore, if individuals are not used to communicating with others from a different type of communication style to their own, it can lead to serious misunderstandings.

For example, if two people are from low context cultures and are thus both direct communicators, then there is a low risk of miscommunication. However, when a person with

an indirect communication style speaks to a person with a direct communication style, there are often misunderstandings. The direct communicator does not understand the full message when it is presented in more than just words. When a direct communicator speaks to an indirect communicator, they can be perceived as blatant and rude.

There is a communication style spectrum between low context and high context cultures. One culture can then be low context or high context in relationship to another culture (Appendix 2, figure 5).

One must take into consideration that when a person uses ESL, they may still be using their original communication style. Therefore, people communicating with different styles (direct and indirect) using English as a Lingua Franca at different fluency levels need to gain and practice the intercultural communication techniques such as *Listening for Understanding*, to avoid misconceptions and misunderstandings.

In recent years, there have been discussions about whether a person is an Asker or a Guesser. This terminology came from a reply to a thread on an online Ask Metafilter (Donderi, 2007), and has since been picked up and used by others. The theory is that people have been brought up in either an Ask culture, or a Guess culture. Those from an Ask culture believe that you can ask for anything, whereas a person from a Guess culture is more subtle and depends on expectation. In other words, they expect something to be offered to them without having to directly ask for it. They will only put forth a wish indirectly, if they think that the answer will be yes (Eichler, 2010). One can see a correlation with the Asker being from what Hall & Hall (1990) would call a low context (direct) type of communication and a Guesser being from a high context (indirect) type of communication.

This raises the question about people's reaction when they are in a situation where they do not understand the context of a discussion. Will they dare to ask for clarification, or help, or will they try to communicate in an indirect way hoping to be given an explanation or assistance? These clashes in communication can hinder collaboration from being successful, or at least it can slow down the process and make it more challenging for all parties involved. Therefore, understanding differences in communication styles is essential to overcome hurdles during collaborations across cultures.

3. The Project

The project was a combination of a workshop entitled 'Living in Sweden with a focus on intercultural competence', pre- and post-workshop surveys and an interview one-month post-workshop. The workshop was held at the beginning of the academic terms Autumn 2019 and Spring 2020 for two separate groups of international PhD students. The aim was for these students to gain culture specific knowledge about their host country, Sweden, and culture general knowledge. The students looked at how values, beliefs, communication, and norms differ in various cultures. During the workshop they also learned about the concepts of intercultural competence and practiced the intercultural skill of *Listening for Understanding* as part of the Story Circles.

3.1 Participants

The participants in both workshops were newly arrived international PhD Students. For the purpose of this thesis, they will be referred to as the students. The invitation to attend both workshops was sent out via the Welcome Services² at the University of Gothenburg and attendance was both voluntary and cost-free.

The invitation for workshop one was sent out directly by the Welcome Services team using a sign-up system called webropol. The invitation was then also included in the Welcome Services' monthly newsletter. For workshop one 27 students registered by the day of the workshop, but only 21 showed up, of which 2 had not previously registered.

For workshop two, the invitation was once again sent out directly to the newly arrived international PhD students via email by the Welcome Services. A registration system called Sembok which is linked to the University's intranet and professional development page was used. The number of places available was increased to 30 and it was fully booked by the time of the workshop, however on the day only 25 students attended. In both cases most of the participants had moved to Sweden in the last 3-6 months prior to the workshops.

The nationalities represented in workshop one were Australia, China, Colombia, Denmark, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Norway, Portugal, Singapore, Turkey and the USA. The additional countries where some of the students in workshop one had lived included

² Welcome Services is a department at the University of Gothenburg that works with international students and staff. The services provided include housing, information, social activities, lectures and workshops.

Argentina, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Cyprus, Hungary, Spain, Morocco, Mozambique, South Africa, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and Uruguay.

The nationalities represented in workshop two were Bahrain, France, Germany, Hungary, India, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Spain and Taiwan. The additional countries where students had lived included Chile, Egypt, Italy, Lebanon, Netherlands, Switzerland, Syria and the United Kingdom. The time-periods, during which students had lived in the additional countries, were not established. Therefore, there is no knowing whether the students had lived there long enough to learn about the invisible aspects of culture in these countries.

3.2 Procedure

3.2.1 Pre-workshop

Approximately one week prior to the workshops the attendees received a welcome email with a link to the pre-workshop survey. The workshop leader, referred to from now on as the teacher, could then read through the data and use some of the information to prepare for the workshop.

On the day of the workshop, students were given thirty minutes for refreshments and mingle. This was stated in the invitation sent out. The mingle allowed students to wind down and feel more present in the space after coming from a full day of studies, work, interaction, and thoughts.

The unofficial start gave the students the opportunity to introduce themselves to one another and engage in small talk about their backgrounds, what they were studying or researching, and above all, they could make connections to feel comfortable with one another before entering the official workshop room.

The teacher was there to welcome them and to engage in conversation. The pre-workshop mingle set the tone. The aim was for the students to feel that they were entering a welcoming, open-minded and respectful environment.

3.2.2 During the workshop

In the beginning of workshop one, the students were asked to stand up, walk around the room and speak to three other people. They were to find out the following three things about each person: 1. Name, 2. What brought them to Sweden, 3. Their hobbies/interests. The students

were given 10 minutes for this exercise. A slide was shown on the screen with these three pieces of information, so that the students could always glance at the slide if they lost track of their questions.

In the beginning of workshop two, the students were instead sitting down facing the front. They were asked to introduce themselves one by one and state the following: 1. Their names, 2. What brought them to Sweden, 3. Their hobbies/interests. Again, a slide with these three points was projected onto the screen, so that the students were able to look up if they were uncertain of what to answer next.

During the time the students presented themselves in workshop two, the teacher took notes of the students' hobbies and interests, in order to address them later, with the aim of connecting students with common interests. Once the personal introductions were over, the workshops could commence. Below is the workshop outline:



The teacher used a PowerPoint presentation to address culture specific knowledge about Sweden and culture general knowledge, theories of intercultural competence and the Story Circle questions.

The first Story Circle in both workshops took place after the presentation slides about values and beliefs. The second Story Circle in both workshops took place after the presentation slides about communication and norms. At the end there were slides focusing on activities available in the Gothenburg Region, and to what extent there were opportunities to pursue the hobbies that had been listed.

Below is a categorised description of slides used to present theories and knowledge during the workshop:

Theoretical concepts of culture:

- The Culture iceberg (Appendix 2, Figure 2)
- World Values Survey from 2015 (Appendix 2, Figure 4)
- Dimensions of culture (Appendix 3, Table 1)

Culture specific knowledge:

Slides were presented to provide knowledge about Swedish values, beliefs, communication style and norms. Here are examples of the topics addressed: lagom³, gender equality, social and organisational structure, social security system, life at university, traditions such as midsummer and Lucia and the ways in which they are celebrated. Fika⁴. Allemansrätt⁵ and the Swedes relationship with nature, the environment, recycling, norms in social and formal.

Theoretical concepts of communication:

- High context vs. low context communication (Appendix 2, Figure 5)

Theoretical concepts of attitude towards cultures:

Two slides were shown to present the different ethnocentric and ethnorelative stages a person can find themselves in, and how individuals need to adapt and be flexible, according to each situation whilst remaining true to themselves.

- Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) (Appendix 2, Figure 7)
- Core and Flex (Appendix 2, Figure 3)

The teacher made it clear from the beginning of the workshop that the students were welcome to interrupt, ask questions or share observations during the presentation. The teacher often asked open and closed questions in order to start a discussion, and for the students to then share their own perspectives and experiences. By constantly asking questions, the teacher aimed to create an open platform, where the students could feel more engaged and freer to express themselves. This methodology is key to separate a workshop from a lecture.

Before introducing each Story Circle topic (Appendix 1, story circle 1 & 2), the teacher divided the students into groups. During workshop one, the teacher asked the students to make groups of 4-5 persons with people they did not know. They were to take their chairs and find a place in the room to sit with their group at a good distance from other groups. During workshop two, the students were asked to sit at the tables placed behind them with people they did not know and to make sure that they were 4-5 people at each table. For both workshops, the teacher specified that if someone felt uncomfortable with being with only people they did not know, it was OK to sit in a group with someone they did know. The

³ Lagom: Not too much, not too little. Moderate, appropriate, adequate, just right.

⁴ Fika: Coffee break. Important for socialising and has become an institution.

⁵ Allemansrätt: The right to public access anywhere in nature.

reason for this is that all the attendees should feel comfortable and relaxed when starting the Story Circle.

Once the students were sitting together and were ready, the teacher could present the slide with the topic of the Story Circle and the timeline. The students were to spend two minutes reflecting over the topic question and the experience that they wished to share. They would spend 5 minutes each to tell their story. The teacher then gave them the guidelines for the story circle as follows: That they would take turns to tell their story. Whilst a person was telling their story, the others in the group should not interrupt, ask questions, or make comments. The students were told that they would be practicing the intercultural skill of *Listening for Understanding*, as opposed to *Listening for Responding* or *Listening for Judging* and by following these guidelines, they would also be practicing the attitude and skills of respect, open-mindedness and to a certain degree, empathy.

The teacher kept a distance from the groups in order not to disturb the narration or to make anyone feel uncomfortable. The role of the teacher was to make sure that the instructions were followed. In addition, the teacher's role was to observe, from a distance, the students' body language and facial expressions to make sure that everyone was comfortable and at ease.

Reflection and debriefing are important aspects of the Story Circle process. For this study, both the reflection and debriefing were carried out by the students individually. Time had been allocated as part of the workshop agenda and the teacher pointed this out so that the students knew that they had twenty minutes to reflect on, and answer the post-workshop survey.

3.2.3 Post-workshop

One month after workshop one, the teacher sent out an email to all the students who had given their consent in the post-workshop survey to be contacted for an interview. The email gave a summary of the workshop and enquired if the students would be willing to meet the teacher for an interview. All the interviews would take place at dates and times according to the students' availability and the teacher would meet them at their departments in order to make it more convenient and less time consuming for them.

One month after workshop two, COVID19 started spreading like wildfire in Europe. The plan for further interviews had to be cancelled as meetings in person were no longer an option. In

addition, the participants in workshop two were deemed to have other priorities in light of the pandemic and were therefore only sent an email explaining the situation and wishing them well during a difficult time. This means that the results for workshop two have not been documented to the same extent as for workshop one.

4. Materials and Methodology

4.1 Materials

4.1.1 Pre-workshop survey

The pre-workshop survey had been put together using google forms with six questions and an email entry box. The number of questions was limited in order to increase the chances of response. The students were asked to enter their email addresses. These could be used to contact the students prior to the workshop, if needed and to plan the post-workshop interview, with their consent.

The first two questions collected information about how long the student had lived in Sweden, if they had lived in other countries prior to their arrival or if this was their first time living abroad. The following two questions focused on their challenges so far, and any visible cultural differences noticed since their arrival. The fifth question incited them to rate their ability to listen. The final question encouraged them to state specific points they would like to bring up during the workshop (Appendix 1, Survey 1).

4.1.2 Observations during the workshops

Observations were made throughout the workshop. The teacher was able to write down some initial observation notes during the Story Circles. The other observations were summed-up written post-workshop. The qualitative data was then divided into categories.

4.1.3 Post-workshop survey

The post-workshop survey consisted of seven questions (Appendix 1, Survey 2) which aimed to increase individual cultural self-awareness, and ability to reflect upon their new knowledge, experiences shared and different feelings evoked within them during the culture general and

culture specific presentations, the open discussions and the structured Story Circles. The aim was also to gather information about the most memorable parts of the workshop experience. Further, the questions were meant to establish whether the participants had the intention to use the skill of *Listening for Understanding* in their daily lives, and whether the combination of new culture general knowledge and intercultural competence skills could benefit their work as researchers. The students were asked if they would be willing to take part in an interview one month later. 12 out of the 16 students who answered the question from workshop one agreed to take part, and 18 out of the 23 students who answered the question from workshop two agreed to participate.

4.1.4 Interviews

The interviews with the students who attended workshop one took place at their departments. Each interview took approximately 45-60 minutes. There were 8 interview questions in total (Appendix 1, Survey 3).

The first question aimed to find out more about the students' studies, research or work and whether the students were working on an international research project, where their colleagues were from and if they were also teaching.

The second question focused on whether the workshop had helped them during their settling in process.

The next two questions focused on the Story Circles and *Listening for Understanding*.

The teacher asked if they had used the skill of *Listening for Understanding* since the workshop and if so in which context. The aim was also to find out whether the Story Circles had helped them learn about the other students and their culture during the workshop, and whether it would be useful to use Story Circles in their own fields.

Questions 5 and 6 focused on cultural differences; whether they had noticed any differences since their arrival and whether they had experienced any cultural challenges. If they had, then it was interesting to hear how they had dealt with the challenges.

The next question focused on communication challenges and misunderstandings and the last question aimed to find out if intercultural competence is a conscious part of their studies/research or work.

4.2 Methodology

The pre-workshop survey was carried out via google forms. The post-workshop survey was filled out by hand. The data was then entered into google forms. The answers for both surveys were then exported into google sheets. There was one google sheet for the pre-workshop questions/answers and one separate google sheet for the post-workshop questions/answers. The teacher made new tabs in each of the google sheets. This meant that there was one page for each question and the answers to that question. The answers from workshop one and workshop two were put side-by-side on the same page.

Quantitative data from the pre- and post-workshop surveys

If the question was a multiple choice, such as question 1 in the pre-workshop survey (Appendix 1, Survey 1) the teacher used the google sheets calculation function to obtain the total results. The teacher then used the table/chart option to create a graph out of the data. However, the final tables and pie charts used in this thesis were later made using in-design for aesthetic purposes.

Answers to question 2 in the pre-workshop survey (Appendix 1, Survey 1) were sorted according to the number of countries the students had lived in. The teacher then manually added the results and used the data to put together a graph.

Other questions such as question 4 in the post-workshop survey were manually counted and put into a table.

Qualitative data from the pre- and post-workshop surveys

All qualitative questions were manually sorted by themes, according to the answers given. Colour coding was used to separate the answers to qualitative questions according to themes/categories. This made it easier to see how many of the students had similar or different answers within the theme, for example with question 4 in the pre-workshop survey (Appendix 1, Survey 1).

Question 3 in the post-workshop survey (Appendix 1, Survey 2) showed that the majority of the answers fell into the categories of: Story Circles/*Listening for Understanding*, culture specific knowledge, culture general knowledge and other.

The answers in each category were added, and the percentage for each category calculated, the results were then turned into a pie chart, using google sheets.

Qualitative data from the interviews

The interviews were all recorded using a dictaphone and then later uploaded onto a computer. The interviews were then transcribed, in order to analyse the qualitative data, and find similarities and differences in the answers.

The questions were looked at one at a time and the answers to the question were categorised. Relevant quotes were then chosen.

| PRE-WORKSHOP SURVEY | OBSERVATIONS BETWEEN WORKSHOP ONE AND TWO | POST-WORKSHOP SURVEY | INTERVIEWS |
|--|---|---|--|
| <p><i>To collect data about:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The students’ background and experience with other cultures. • Cultural challenges since moving to Sweden. • Knowledge the students would like to gain at the workshop. | <p><i>To collect data about:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culture specific and culture general knowledge gained. • Communication styles amongst the students. • Attitude: The ability to decentre. | <p><i>To collect data about:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge gained about social groups and communication styles. • Students’ attitude and whether they were able to decentre. • Skills gained throughout the workshop. | <p><i>To collect data about:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How the students have benefited from the knowledge gained? • Has the students’ perspective and attitude changed since the workshop? • What knowledge and skills can benefit the students in their research? |

Table 1: Overview of data collection

5. Findings

5.1 Pre-workshop survey

21 students from workshop one and 19 students from workshop two answered the pre-workshop survey. The answers to the pre-workshop survey provided background information about the students' knowledge of their host country and their expectations of the workshop. The fact that they registered for the workshop and answered the survey shows their interest in learning about others and their host country, Sweden. The survey also gave an indication of the students' experience of living abroad and their exposure to other cultures. One could also learn how many of these students were using English as a Second Language; an important aspect linked to the use of language and communication styles. The students' answers could also give an indication about their current challenges and what they would like to learn more about, when it comes to cultural knowledge and intercultural competence.

One observation is that although the questions were not about Swedes and Sweden only, the answers were all focused on the host country. The students did not consider the international environment or groups that surrounded them.

5.1.1 Students' backgrounds and experience with other cultures

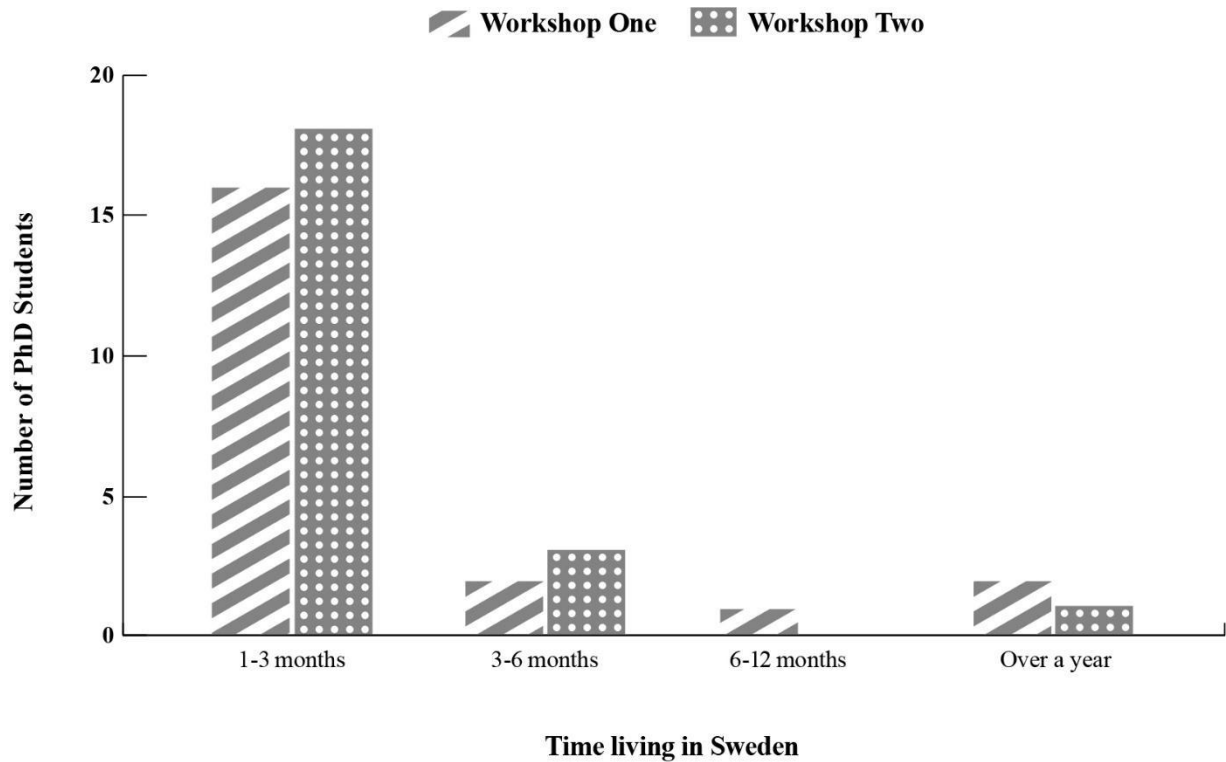
1. When did you move to Sweden?

a. 1-3 months

b. 3-6 months

c. 6-12 months

d. Over a year



Graph 1: Time living in Sweden prior to the workshop.

Most students, in both workshops, had arrived in Sweden in the last three months prior to the workshops. This means that they would be in the honeymoon stage of their culture shock curve (Appendix 2, Figure 6), taking in all the new impressions and comparing similarities and differences with their home country.

2. What countries have you lived in prior to moving to Sweden?

Please list the countries.

The answer to this question could indicate what previous level of exposure the students had to other cultures. If they had lived in other places, the likelihood of them having previously experienced several stages of the culture shock curve was higher.

| | 1 COUNTRY | 2 COUNTRIES | 3 COUNTRIES | 4 COUNTRIES OR MORE |
|--|-----------|-------------|-------------|---------------------|
| NUMBER OF STUDENTS FROM WORKSHOP ONE <i>(Total of 21 students)</i> | 5 | 3 | 5 | 8 |
| NUMBER OF STUDENTS FROM WORKSHOP TWO <i>(Total of 19 students)</i> | 12 | 1 | 4 | 2 |

Table 2: Number of countries the students have lived in.

As indicated in the table above 5 of the students in workshop one had lived in only 1 country compared to 12 of the students who attended workshop two. This means that altogether 17 students had never experienced the challenges of living in a new country and adapting to a new culture. 8 of the students in workshop one had lived in 4 countries or more, compared to 2 of the students who attended workshop two. This means that the students in workshop one had more experience with other cultures and adapting to new countries compared to the students in workshop two.

In workshop one there were 2 students who had English as their mother tongue and 1 student in workshop two. Therefore, most of the participants were using English as a Second Language. The level of English varied between the participants, although the majority had an advanced level.

5.1.2 Cultural challenges since moving to Sweden

3. What has been your biggest challenge since moving to Sweden?

The top three answers for the students in both workshops were finding accommodation, making friends and administrative procedures such as opening a bank account and understanding the healthcare system. These challenges were then followed by language and lifestyle. These challenges take time and energy during the settling in period. New norms, systems and forms of communication can be overwhelming for the students.

4. What is the biggest cultural difference you have noticed?

The majority of the answers were related to communication and interaction. The answers and observations ranged from how Swedes greet each other to how they seem more independent, less communicative, avoiders of conflict, hard to befriend, polite but quiet.

The next largest challenge the students faced was related to lifestyle and norms, ranging from daily routines, working hours, bureaucracy, eating habits to smoking areas and a no cash society. The other differences observed were related to Swedes' relationship to nature and food, especially the concept and practice of Fika.

The answers to this question and the previous one enforced the need of learning about communication styles, traditions and norms, all of which would be covered during the workshop. Gaining culture specific knowledge, culture general knowledge and knowledge about the variety of communication styles not only help students in their private lives, but directly and indirectly to become better collaborators and researchers.

5. On a scale from 1-4 how good are you at listening?

1. poor

2. good

3. very good

4. excellent

The students did not know when answering the pre-workshop questionnaire that they would be practicing the skill of *Listening for Understanding* as a part of the Story Circles in the workshop.



Graph 2: The ability to listen

The graph shows that most of the students consider themselves to be very good listeners. This question aimed to awaken a cognitive reflection about their ability to listen prior to the workshop. In the post-workshop survey and interviews, one could then learn whether this technique of listening helped them gain new knowledge and proved to be advantageous for them as researchers and with their research projects.

5.1.3 What knowledge would the students like to gain?

| |
|--|
| 6. Is there something specific you would like to discuss/learn about during the workshop? |
|--|

Only 17 students from workshop one answered this question and 8 of them wanted to learn about how to interact with Swedes and make friends. Other students wanted to know if they would be corrected when trying to speak the Swedish language and they wanted to know how not to make mistakes in general. 17 of the students from workshop two answered this question. There was an even interest about learning about the Swedish communication style and unspoken rules in everyday life. The majority wanted to know about social activities and traditions that they could experience.

One can note that the students from workshop one who had more experience living in other countries were more interested in learning about Swedish communication styles and how to build relationships compared to the students in workshop two, who wanted to learn about activities and everyday life. The hypothesis could be that students who have lived in different countries have experienced the settling stages of honeymoon, culture shock, adjustment and adaptation (Appendix 2, Figure 6). They are aware that intercultural communication is one of the biggest challenges when living abroad.

Students who are living abroad for the first time are more oblivious to the different culture shock stages and communication challenges. Their focus is more about the honeymoon period and learning about all the fun things to do.

The pre-workshop survey gave the teacher a good overview of the exposure to other cultures, cultural challenges they had faced and topics they wished to learn more about. The data also reinforced the teacher's hypothesis that the workshop could give them the knowledge needed to become more interculturally competent both in their private and in their work lives.

5.2 Observations between workshop one and two

5.2.1 Gaining knowledge about cultures and intercultural competence

All the students shared a story during the Story Circles. This means that they also heard 4 to 5 stories narrated by other students with a different cultural background to their own. Through the stories they could gain new knowledge about another student's cultural background and perspectives, and relate it to the culture general knowledge gained about values, beliefs, norms and forms of communication. In general, the methodology of the Story Circles was a good way to practice skills such as *interpret and relate*, *critical cultural awareness*, *discovery and interaction* (Byram et al., 2002) and *Listening for Understanding* (Deardorff, 2020).

5.2.2 Understanding the variety of communication styles & the benefits of *Listening for Understanding*

The first noticeable difference in the interaction between the participants in workshop one and two was during the introduction at the beginning of both workshops. For workshop one the students had been asked to speak to at least three persons and to introduce themselves with three specific pieces of information. At the end of this introduction the teacher asked what memorable information they had learned about those they had spoken to. Most of the answers given were related to something personal, such as the person's hobbies, rather than their profession or area of research. Most of the students had also spoken to only one or two persons during the time given, even if they were asked to speak to three persons and were told when there were only a few minutes left. The reason for this is that they had got caught up sharing their experiences since arriving in Sweden.

During workshop two, everyone took turns to introduce themselves. The students answered all three questions without going off track. This meant that when a student shared the same interest as another student, they automatically looked at that person and started their sentence with "I also like...", creating an immediate connection through common ground. Sometimes they spontaneously exchanged a few words, creating a nice, relaxed atmosphere of sharing. Very few of the participants belonged to the same department, so both ways of introducing themselves helped them to become acquainted with one another. However, the introductions

in workshop two gave everyone the opportunity to listen to each student and make personal connections with numerous people.

During the Story Circles in workshop one, there were 5 groups. In one of the groups there was an individual who was constantly interrupting the person whose turn it was to tell the story. He was asking questions and making comments. This prompted others to also speak and the process turned from *Listening for Understanding* and taking turns to a discussion. The teacher then noticed that the group beside them also started discussing rather than taking turns. The teacher therefore had to ask for everyone's attention and asked if everyone had finished telling their stories. When the answer given was 'no', then the teacher was able to remind them to take turns and practice the skill of *Listening for Understanding*.

During workshop two, the same thing happened in one of the groups where one person kept interrupting the narrator and finding it hard to follow the instruction of *Listening for Understanding*. After the first story circle for both workshops the teacher asked the participants if they had found it hard to follow *Listening for Understanding*, rather than for responding, commenting or judging. Nobody said that it was difficult. But the teacher noted through observation of the groups that some people found it hard not to interrupt and did not even notice their own behaviour. Teachers using this methodology must be very clear on their instruction prior to the Story Circles but should also note that there will often be someone who cannot stop themselves from listening to respond. Whether this is a cultural or a personal trait is hard to identify.

5.2.3 A cognitive awareness of being ethnorelative

The students' attitude and ability to decentre and be ethnorelative could not be measured during the workshop. However, when presenting Bennett's DMIS stages, the teacher noticed that the students in both workshops were interested in Bennett's theory.

Some of the students asked questions about the stages and stated that it was interesting to consider what stages they were currently in. Unfortunately, the teacher was not able to take a note of the questions asked during the workshop. It would be beneficial to have another person present to help the teacher by taking notes of questions and comments at future workshops.

5.3 Post-workshop survey

A total of 39 students filled in the post-workshop survey. The survey findings give an indication of what knowledge was gained by the students during the workshop in alignment with the study. As the students answered the questions immediately after the workshop, the experience and knowledge were still fresh in their minds.

The findings have first been analysed according to Byram et al.'s (2002) components of intercultural competence: Knowledge, attitudes and skills.

Each component has then been divided into subcategories. The table below shows the subcategories used to analyse the students' answers. The results can then show the students' self-awareness of attitude, their ability to decentre and the skills they learned or practiced during the workshop that can benefit them in their research.

| KNOWLEDGE | ATTITUDES | SKILLS |
|---|---|---|
| <p>CULTURES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culture specific knowledge (Sweden) • Culture general knowledge <p>COMMUNICATION STYLES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specific communication style (Sweden) • Variety of communication styles | <p>THE ABILITY TO DECENTRE</p> <p><i>(No longer see one's own culture as the only way or best way of doing things)</i></p> | <p>INTERPRET AND RELATE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to interpret, explain and relate a document/event from another culture to one's own. <p>DISCOVERY AND INTERACTION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to interact and gain new knowledge about a person's culture or a cultural practice, whilst putting into practice the knowledge about that culture one already has when communicating. <p>CRITICAL CULTURAL AWARENESS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ability to critically evaluate one's own or another person's culture. <i>(Byram et al., 2002)</i> <p>LISTENING FOR UNDERSTANDING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Listening for Understanding</i>, rather than listening for responding or judging. <i>(Deardorff, 2020)</i> |

Table 3: Knowledge, attitudes and skills

1. What did you learn about yourself today?

Gaining knowledge about cultures and intercultural competence

Some students answered this question focusing on what they had learned about culture, rather than themselves. This shows that these students did not read the question properly or chose to answer it differently.

In workshop one 3 students felt that they already knew a lot about cultural differences, whereas another person believed that although they had lived in different countries, they needed to understand Sweden more to see things from another perspective.

In workshop two 2 students answered that they felt that their culture was like Sweden's, when it came to values and communication. One student realised how much he enjoyed being in Sweden, whilst another mentioned that the workshop helped them to learn more about the Swedish culture.

Other students learned about cultural differences and perspectives in general. One student stated that contrary to their expectation, cultural differences can be quite big inside of Europe. Another student felt that they did not learn about themselves, but rather about others. The answers show that the students gained knowledge and were able to practice the skill of *interpret and relate*, interpreting other cultures and relating it to their own.

Understanding the variety of communication styles & the benefits of *Listening for Understanding*

In workshop one, 2 students noted their ability to express themselves in front of strangers. This is an important skill when living and working in a new country and wanting to make new friends. It also strengthens the students' ability to communicate with others on academic collaborations. Several students commented on *Listening for Understanding*; some students believed that it was not that hard to listen and not interrupt, whereas another student mentioned how they felt that it is easier to listen to answer rather than *Listening for Understanding*.

In workshop two, 3 students answered that they learned about their own ability to listen. The first claimed to learn how to listen to communicate thoughts and to be sensitive to differences. The second stated that they were a good listener and preferred listening to sharing

their own story. The third stated that they needed to be less shy to take part in activities and meet people to have a great experience during their time in Sweden. Finally, there was a student who mentioned being reserved, but forced to communicate. 4 people did not answer the question at all. This question was important for the students to consciously reflect on themselves and for these students the knowledge gained about themselves involved their own communication style and intercultural skill of *discovery and interaction*. This is an example of how knowledge and skills are intertwined. Discovery comes from new knowledge gained. The students discover new traits in their attitudes and behaviour.

A cognitive awareness of being ethnorelative

In workshop one there were vastly different opinions on what they had learned about themselves; 1 student had a more ethnocentric view minimizing cultural differences by stating that Swedish culture was close to their own. Another thought that they could become Swedish and a third student believed that adapting to Sweden would take longer than they thought. The level of ethnorelativism and the journey to adapting to their host country was expressed; 1 person felt that they had succeeded so far to adapt and integrate with their colleagues, whereas another learned that they needed to be more tolerant to someone else's culture.

In workshop two a student stated that there are more cultural differences between Germans and Swedes than he originally thought, and another stated that they have been far too optimistic about their settling in period and that it will get harder to adjust to Sweden. One student commented that they had a lot to learn and that it was just the beginning. Another said that they had been comparing behaviour at the workplace with their own background and mindset and judging some of that behaviour. Now this student had realised his mistake, "Cultures are different, and the same behaviour can have different meanings". One student wrote "There exist a large variety of mindset and I should not compare or judge them with each other and with myself".

2. What common themes did you hear in the stories?

Gaining knowledge about cultures and intercultural competence

In workshop one the students expressed that the stories told were either bad, about misbehaviour that might come from different backgrounds or good, focusing on generosity

and hospitality from different cultures. The concept of individualism vs. collectivism was also mentioned as a common theme and one student believed that it is easy to slip into stereotypes. Some of the culture knowledge shared was in relation to their host country, Sweden; the general nature of Swedish people and how even though they are friendly, it is a challenge to become friends with Swedes. In general, the students noted the importance of cultural understanding, that there are different cultural perspectives, that they will all experience cultural differences and that culture shock is quite common.

In workshop two several students believed that a common theme raised was cultural differences and openness. Other students talked about gender equality, respect for different cultural beliefs and religion. A student mentioned that these differences are just differences in the beginning, but they may become arguments later. Another student believed there can be a clash of expectations sometimes when discovering that some things are not set in stone and they differ depending on culture. The responses showed an overall awareness of cultural and religious differences and how assumptions we have regarding people are often false. The students were able to use the intercultural skill *interpret and relate* – interpreting themes and relating them to their own culture.

Understanding the variety of communication styles & the benefits of *Listening for Understanding*

Few students answered this question with a focus on communication, however communication is a part of all stories, whether it is verbal or non-verbal communication. A student in workshop two mentioned communication barriers in intercultural experience. Another student raised the importance of asking questions to understand another person if there is miscommunication.

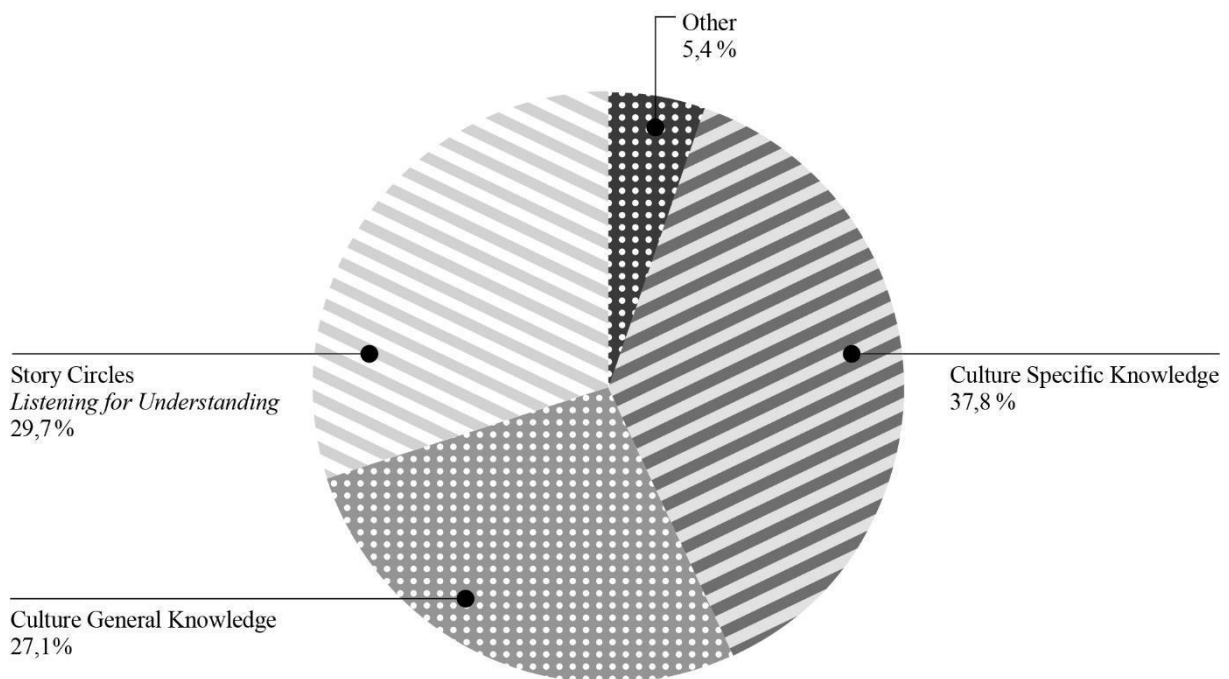
A cognitive awareness of being ethnorelative

In workshop one most of the students' found that the common theme of the stories leaned towards the ethnorelative stages of seeing cultures as unique and equal. A student mentioned how one should not assume that people will react and behave a certain way according to what one is used to.

Another student pointed out how people can get offended if others do not know much about their culture. There was an awareness that every story was about discovery and learning and that there was surprise, delight and the stories prompted them to reflect upon themselves.

The students in workshop two expressed that everyone has problems in their country and culture, that everybody faces the same kinds of problems when they are in different cultural environments and that culturally shocking situations may become acceptable once they have been understood. There was a general awareness of needing to adapt to people and other cultures. However, one student expressed the insecurity of raising the question of “How do you then know if you have done something wrong? Knowing how to behave in order to fit into a new society, where people do not give you feedback”.

3. What is memorable about what you have heard today?



Graph 3: Most memorable topics heard at the workshop.

The answers to this question were sorted into 4 topics: Culture specific knowledge (about Sweden), culture general knowledge, Story Circles/*Listening for Understanding* and other.

Gaining knowledge about cultures and intercultural competence

In workshop one, students raised the fact that many of them have experienced similar events in different contexts. This revelation can help them develop the skill of *critical cultural awareness*, so they are able to critically evaluate their own experience and that of others.

Some students found that Swedish culture specific knowledge was memorable, such as the Swedish concept of lagom, a concept that is important knowledge of Swedes as a social group. It defines them both individually and as a nation.

In workshop two students found that trying to understand differences instead of judging was of importance and that learning about cultural differences and models is beneficial. Students in both workshops debated how in their opinion Sweden is an individualistic culture. One hypothesis made was that the Swedish social security system supports people to such an extent that Swedes do not need to turn to their family and closest friends for support. In both groups, students gave positive feedback about the presentation showing cultural diagrams in a theoretical format to compare aspects of different countries.

Understanding the variety of communication styles & the benefits of *Listening for Understanding*

In workshop one some students found that knowledge about low context vs. high context communication styles was memorable. In workshop two a student found it memorable how a person can find it hard to address someone by their first name. This refers to the fact that in Sweden titles are not commonly used. People address one another on a first name basis, compared to other cultures where titles such as Mr, Mrs, Sir or Madam are necessary. Students in both workshops brought up *Listening for Understanding* as being memorable.

Learning about different communication styles can then help the students to develop the intercultural competence skill of *discovery and interaction*. In future conversations they can use the communication knowledge they have gained, whilst gaining new knowledge about the other person's culture and cultural practices.

A cognitive awareness of being ethnorelative

One student stated that most memorable for them were the "Core values and how important they are to define. Not to be flexible about the core values". This student refers to the importance of being true to their own identity and core values whilst adapting to other cultures in order not to lose one's own identity. For another student embracing diversity was most memorable, the ability to see beyond just one's own culture.

4. Listening for Understanding: Is this a skill that you will continue to use in the future?

| | YES | NO | MAYBE |
|--|-----|----|-------|
| Number of students who answered the question | 38 | 0 | 1 |

Table 4: Listening for Understanding

As shown in the table above, all the students in both workshops who completed the questionnaire answered ‘yes’ to the question above, apart from one student in workshop one who answered ‘maybe’. This means that the students understood the benefits of *Listening for Understanding* rather than to respond or judge. The fact that almost all of the students stated that they would carry on using the skill in the future gave the teacher the impression that it had an immediate positive effect benefiting their communication and collaborations both on a personal level and in their work as researchers.

5. Do you think the workshop will help you to adapt to life in Sweden?

| | YES | NO | MAYBE |
|--|-----|----|-------|
| Number of students who answered the question | 30 | 0 | 9 |

Table 5: Adapting to life in Sweden

The table shows that the students feel that they have gained sufficient knowledge about specific (Swedish) culture, general culture and communication styles to be able to adapt to their new host country. This is a positive response that shows the benefit of such a workshop in the beginning of their settling in process.

6. How has the workshop helped you?

Gaining knowledge about cultures and intercultural competence

Most of the feedback given from the students in workshop one was about Swedish culture specific knowledge. They expressed that the workshop gave them useful information about Sweden and Swedes, for example how most households recycle 99% of their waste. One student stated that it reinforced the general impression they already had, which meant that they were at least reassured of their own knowledge.

The workshop taught them about Swedish norms. This knowledge gave them an understanding of what to expect and what to avoid in different contexts. The new knowledge could also help them to network with a better understanding of Swedish culture. One student stated that they looked forward to “Starting to know Sweden for real”.

In workshop two the students thought that the iceberg (Hall, 1977) and the dimensions of national culture (Hofstede, 2010) helped them to understand different perspectives of people, who they already interact with. There was both self-reflection about being able to interpret one’s own culture and a realisation of the need to read up more about Swedish culture. As far as culture is concerned, the theoretical culture models helped to give the students a new awareness of themselves and others. This is evidence of the intercultural competence skill of *critical cultural awareness* that can help them to analyse future situations and have new perspectives when interacting with others.

Understanding the variety of communication styles & the benefits of *Listening for Understanding*

As far as communication was concerned, one student from workshop one stated that the workshop helped them to learn to listen to understand, whilst another student answered, “I have made 4 new friends who come from different countries”. This indicates that the workshop was beneficial not just in becoming a better listener, which is a key skill when communicating across cultures, but they also enjoyed communicating with one another, sharing experiences and as a result, also making friends.

In workshop two a student thought that it was fun and amazing talking to people with a totally different background. This shows that the intercultural exchange made this person feel

positive and encourages them to continue to meet others with different cultural backgrounds. This sentiment was shared by other students who stated “It helped me to increase my knowledge in many aspects, meet some students and discuss many issues”. These are not conversations that would necessarily have taken place if they had not been given the opportunity to be in such a forum. The fact that the students had learned about different communication styles gave them a new awareness of their own style and that of others helping them to gain a new perspective on their interaction in the workshop. One student was grateful to learn about the Swedish communication style and “Learning about unspoken rules for formal vs. informal meetings was useful”.

A cognitive awareness of being ethnorelative

The answers to this question revealed a cognitive reflection upon their perspectives about their own culture and that of others. Several students believed that the workshop helped prepare them for meeting new people, adapting and integrating. A student in workshop one stated that “arriving into a new country and adapting is a process which takes time and that the workshop has helped prepare for the process”. Another student confirmed their journey from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism by stating that the workshop helped them “to realise some personal resistance to change and culture”. The workshop helped another student reflect on the equality of cultures, “To realise that every culture is similarly important”. In workshop two there were also students who realised that they needed to be more interculturally competent. One student stated that the workshop helped them “to stay open-minded and patient during the contact to people from other countries”. Other students felt that the workshop helped them realise that they are not alone, “It has helped in the sense that I see that problems I had or might have in adapting to a different culture are more common than I thought”. In other words, these students were able to see past their own cultures and experiences and understand that there are different ways of doing things. The students also realised that they are not alone in experiencing the process of being able to decentre. These answers show that there were immediate benefits from the workshop.

7. Complete this sentence "I used to think...Now I think..."

Gaining knowledge about cultures and intercultural competence

The sentences related to culture focus mainly on the similarities between Swedish culture and their own. For example, "I used to think that Swedes are similar to the UK, Canada, now I think that they are more similar to Indonesia in certain aspects". The students showed their ability to interpret Swedish culture and relate it to their own, "I used to think that Swedish people are very culturally different from me, now I think I have common values with them".

One student realised that there is more to culture than meets the eye, "I used to think that French and Swedish culture are not that different regarding we are both in Europe, now I think I have a lot to continue to learn from Swedish culture". Whereas another student pointed out the importance of being able to talk about cultures without stereotyping, "I used to think that it is hard to talk about culture without many stereotypes, now I think that it is possible but avoiding is important". These reflections show that the theoretical concepts used during the workshop gave the students' knowledge of how to analyse cultures to then be able to relate it to their own. Through the theoretical knowledge given, they were able to determine and understand how their culture and others are similar or different.

Understanding the variety of communication styles & the benefits of *Listening for Understanding*

The positive experience of the Story Circles gave the student confidence to want to interact more with others. One of the students reflected upon their own communication skills, "I used to think I'm too shy to talk in public, now I think it can be a really interesting experience of sharing our stories".

Other students' answers show how their perspectives of Swedes changed with the workshop, "I used to think that Swedish people are sometimes disrespectful but now I think that it is because of their low context tendency". Another student stated, "I used to think Swedish people are cold and not communicative, now I think they are just communicating in a different way".

By practicing *Listening for Understanding*, a student could reflect on Swedes' ability to listen and their way of communicating in a more ethnorelative manner, "I used to think that Swedes are more communicative. Now I think they might be better listeners".

A cognitive awareness of being ethnorelative

Most of the sentences completed by the students show a positive change in their perspective and even a willingness to alter their attitude, as one student said "I used to think that I couldn't blend into Swedish community, now I think maybe I should give it a try and start to accept and embrace it". New cultural knowledge resulted in some students thinking that adapting could be harder than expected, "I used to think that I could adapt to a country, now I think that I am not so sure".

Other students realised that integrating can take a long time, "I used to think it would be fast to integrate with Swedes/Swedish life, now I think it takes some time and it's natural and okay that it takes some time".

The majority of the students stated how the workshop directly benefits them in their settling in process, showing that this workshop has resulted to be successful on many levels: "I used to think that living and adjusting to Swedish culture would be challenging, which now I think that by today's seminar would be easier".

The workshop has given the students the courage to be more open-minded and curious about their host country. They are aware that they will still face challenges when they are in situations or interactions that feel uncomfortable or go against their core values, but the new knowledge has also provided them with the ability to reflect and adapt when necessary. "I used to think that I have to adjust by myself, but now I think that this program helped me to whom I can contact". It is important that the students do not feel alone and have the courage to ask and learn more when needed, rather than suffering with their challenges in silence.

"I used to think that Sweden is dark and pretty cold but now I think it is way more colourful and there are many activities that I can plan to do! (however, it is still cold for me :)". This quote shows that with knowledge, new understanding and perspective, life can seem easier and more positive.

Two students stated how their perspectives changed from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism: “I used to think my view was best, now I think I need to be more open and understanding of situations and culture”. “I used to think that I am right always, now I think I am wrong sometimes”.

And the one student who had previous academic experience of cultures stated the importance of continually widening their perspectives, “I don't think that my thinking has changed. Having a degree in anthropology & having lived in several different countries, I am familiar with the need to respect & adapt to different cultures. However, I absolutely appreciate the chance to reflect, hear other people's stories and continually widen & challenge my perspectives”.

These responses show concrete ways of how the workshop and new cultural knowledge benefited these students. If they continue to have a positive attitude and use skills such as *critical cultural awareness, discovery and interaction, interpret and relate* and *Listening for Understanding* in their everyday lives, they are well on their way to developing the intercultural competence needed to work on international research projects, becoming better researchers and strengthening international collaboration.

5.4 Interviews

Interviews were conducted with eight students coming from Australia, Colombia, Denmark, Germany, India, Italy, Turkey and the USA. All these students attended workshop one.

The first question asked was ‘what are you studying/researching/working with?’. This gave the teacher an overview of their backgrounds, whether they were working on international projects and if they were teaching or had teaching experience.

Out of the eight students interviewed, seven were working on international projects. They were working with other students located in different parts of the world and the research fieldwork was also being carried out across nations and disciplines.

Three of the students had some teaching experience, of whom one was currently a Senior Lecturer. Two of the other students believed that they would be teaching in the years to come and the remaining three did not have any plans to teach. The students’ current positions and

projects are not included in the findings to keep their identities anonymous. The teaching aspect was important because the workshop and new knowledge gained can also benefit them as teachers, not just researchers.

The interview findings could answer the following:

- Implementation of culture knowledge and intercultural competence in research and teaching
- Understanding the variety of communication styles and the benefits of *Listening for Understanding*
- The ability to become more ethnorelative in their work as PhD students

5.4.1 Implementation of culture knowledge and intercultural competence in research and teaching

For many of the students the knowledge gained about Swedish culture helped them to understand the society better. Since the workshop, most of the students interviewed had identified aspects of Swedish culture that had been discussed during the workshop, for example: Sweden is more of an egalitarian culture and there is a high level of consensus among colleagues and friends. One student stated that “The workshop in my opinion was particularly good. The main thing that I always remember is Lagom. This way with decisions and the community and that everyone should have a consensus. I started thinking about it to see if I can see it. Because in other societies we do not give the same importance. It is not that we do not care, it is achieved in a different way... I’m happy and I hope that you keep doing this. To me it was very useful” (Student 8).

The students also learned about how Swedes, in general, keep to themselves both personally and professionally. This means that some students must become proactive and to a certain degree become askers, rather than guessers. Student 7 stated that “If you're uncertain, you have to actively ask for help, nobody is really automatically forthcoming...The general work environment is different...Work environment tends to be more relaxed...a more work/life balance”.

The workshop made the students reflect upon their own behaviour and interaction with their colleagues. One student pointed out that, “It is hard to make friends here” (student 6). A common point that the majority of the students expressed was their appreciation of meeting others in the same situation as themselves and being able to share experiences and make new friends. It is important for the students not to feel alone in their host country. Student 5 stated that the workshop “more than helped. It reinforced what I’d heard already about Swedish people. It was good to get an understanding of what to expect”.

Many of the students also appreciated hearing about Swedish traditions and customs and one student mentioned how he intended to use the knowledge, “I did take away Lucia and other celebrations...I can use it as points of conversation with colleagues afterwards” (Student 1). A few of the students were not new to Sweden. Two of them had lived here before for a short period of time and the third came from a neighbouring country. The latter student had attended the workshop with her partner who was from another country. She was aware that she did not really experience a settling in phase or a culture shock to Sweden when compared to her partner. It was his experience that was making her notice cultural differences and to see them from another perspective, “It is just the way we do it. But then I realised that this is probably weird for someone coming from outside”.

Another student talked about how Bennett’s DMIS stages helped her in the settling in process. She was able to reflect upon herself and her current stage. Moreover, she was able to analyse her own attitude and behaviour in different situations, “I did. It made me think when you were explaining the different phases I could place myself, I could distinguish myself...oh I am between this one and this one...Every time I’m having these thoughts like ‘this is super better in my country’, it’s just different and it’s fine. I’m trying to get into that, so it actually helped” (Student 4).

The students interviewed expressed their interest in finding more similarities between cultures. Discovering that vastly different cultures can be connected by their habits, values, customs and even music was described by a student as being “fascinating, for I wouldn’t even know”. Learning more about different cultures helps the students make connections between their culture and others, awakening an interest in wanting to gain more knowledge about more cultures.

One student compared her culture to European culture in general. She felt that everything was more fixed and stricter in Europe. When talking about work she said “...everything is very calendar orientated and I feel that I should not upset the calendar” (Student 5). She also compared family relationships. She came from a collectivistic culture where people have strong family ties, so it was a culture shock for her to see that friends played a more important role for people in the countries in Europe she has been to. These countries had individualistic cultures. Learning about the two differences in culture helped her to gain critical cultural awareness. She was able to see different cultures as different yet equal realities and ways of doing things.

One student had lived in several countries as a researcher and learned how to respect and adapt to certain cultural and religious norms in other countries. In a recent interaction she was reminded that we cannot always be interculturally competent, “For example, they (Muslims in a country where she recently lived) do not shake your hand and this was a shock to me. Because in Europe it is normal. This was a great shock. So, when I came here to Sweden, I could be free when shaking hands. This was a sort of thing that I started doing again and I noticed that one evening I was going back to my department, and I was walking with someone who I discovered was my neighbour. He was from India and when greeting him, I went to shake his hand. I noticed that he was embarrassed. I was so embarrassed. I thought that he was living in Europe more time, then I thought ‘I’m really stupid because I had to know’” (Student 8). The student felt that she had made a mistake and acknowledged that it is difficult to always be interculturally competent.

5.4.2 Understanding the variety of communication styles and the benefits of *Listening for Understanding*

Understanding different communication styles and how people interact, verbally and non-verbally is extremely important. Learning about these styles was beneficial to the students to understand themselves better, to identify communication breakdowns and to feel more prepared in future interactions with people from other cultures.

A student talked about how interesting it was to learn about how others perceive his own culture and communication style. It was not something he had considered previously, but that it was an important aspect of having a dialogue.

One student was grateful to learn about the different types of communication. He had been worried that people in Sweden did not want to talk to him because in his culture people talk all the time. The workshop gave him a new insight into how different cultures communicate, “I am from a different culture and we tend to speak more in a typical conversation. Daily conversation. At first, I thought that they did not want to talk to me, the people here. But then I understand that, that is how they live. I just learned how to adjust myself to here and I learned how different cultures live this. It was very simple, but I never thought of it, so it was an epiphany for me to realise, yeah, our culture is totally like that. That was great, not just for adjusting here but in general”. He was relieved and since the workshop he has tried to adapt to Swedish culture and communication style.

Several of the students were more self-aware of their own communication styles and were trying to adapt and to be better listeners, “I recognise it sometimes that I am cutting [off] people and I caught myself doing it and was like: Oh, gosh. Why? No. Try not to do it” (Student 4). The same student also reflected on gaining new competence, “We need to deconstruct to come away from toxic behaviour we all fall into...it is to be aware of what we are doing and if we are aware, you caught yourself and think this is not that good, you're gaining competence”.

Communication styles often transfer over to new languages one learns. 1 ESL student recognised this about herself, “When I first came to Europe, I was less conscious of my language. I would maybe talk fast. I found myself finishing someone else's sentence...I wanted to jump in and help them out, which is not helpful. If I knew what they were going to say, I kind of interrupted, so not interculturally competent, I'd say” (Student 5).

A native English speaker also high-lighted the importance of listening and actively stopping themselves from interrupting other people whilst they are speaking, “So your practice of listening has to adapt to that environment...you learn not to jump in and find a word for them, to let them find what they are trying to say in their own time” (Student 7).

Learning about communication styles and the skill of *Listening for Understanding*, the students can gain the competence also to discuss the communication breakdowns.

Miscommunication and not daring to ask for clarification can sabotage a research project if one is not careful. One student stated that within her research group, “Within my group there

are less misunderstandings as we have similar English, but the new members, the Swedish ones and Islandic girl, they have a very good English so sometimes I do not understand them...sometimes I do not want them to repeat too many times, so sometimes I only ask them to repeat if it is really important. Hopefully, I get what is important and what not...sometimes when we are talking about something scientific, then we have to write and that makes it easier” (Student 8). The student in question had a particularly good level of English, which leads one to believe that maybe if the other students knew more about different communication styles then these communication hurdles could be passed.

Many of the students interviewed found that the Story Circles were important, especially when meeting new people and being new to Sweden. The exercise had helped some of the students to notice the differences of communication in Sweden, compared to what they were used to. For example, one student pointed out that in the meetings she had attended, people were raising their hands before speaking and nobody was speaking over anybody else. She could then adapt to this procedure.

Other students became aware of people from their own cultures, who maybe speak more than they listen. They could understand the benefits of *Listening for Understanding*, especially when being new to a new country, “I try to listen more and I try to lead the conversation with what they are saying. I’m listening to understand here as I do not know people” (Student 6).

5.4.3 The ability to become more ethnorelative in their work as PhD students

Such knowledge and competence can help students strengthen collaborations with colleagues. One student pointed out how knowing more about each other’s backgrounds and cultures can have a direct impact on the research project, as they become more aware of the benefits of having different perspectives, and the mutual understanding of their different working methods. One student pointed out that, “so it would be good to sit and talk about the cultural aspect we all have. I think it would help a lot, also in the dynamic of how we want this project to end up. Also, because it is an interdisciplinary project, so if we understand each other better, not only the other discipline but also the other part of the world you don’t know about” (Student 4).

One student referred to Hofstede et al.'s dimension of power distance depending on whether a culture is more hierarchical or egalitarian and how that reflects on the communication style. In the workshop the group had discussed Swedes and how they tend to avoid conflicts and put importance on consensus. The student mentioned how she was consciously thinking about the level of power distance in Sweden, especially when working on her research project, "I tried to think of that after the workshop, the part of consensus is very important" (Student 8).

If PhD students all over the world not only gained culture general knowledge, but also intercultural skills, they could implement some of these skills in their research methodology. For example, student 7 pointed out her interest in using the skill of *Listening for Understanding* as part of her methodology when carrying out research, "I'm planning to do fieldwork and speak to various people and different stakeholders and this Listening to Understand might be useful when you have stakeholders with different interests and different needs".

Student 5 also stated that "I will be doing research in different parts of Europe so I will keep it in mind so not to have conflict and to understand each other, because my cultural background is different. I will be doing some internships in Sweden, so there too I will have to figure it out". The student shows that knowledge about communication styles and skills such as *Listening for Understanding* can benefit her in the future to avoid miscommunications and be effective in different situations and places.

A Medical student also talked about the benefits of learning about other cultures when dealing with patients who have different cultural backgrounds. The culture general knowledge helps medical staff to address their patients and interpret their concerns. They also learn how to direct the conversation so that the patient gives them the necessary information needed about their condition during the limited time they have to examine them, "Totally, that is the missing part in medical education in the world" (Student 6). He also mentioned that sometimes the patients have a different mother tongue to the medical staff, so learning about communication styles is beneficial to medical staff.

Students who also teach as a part of their PhD programmes can benefit from culture general knowledge and intercultural competence skills to understand their students and to communicate the lesson in the best way possible. One student shared his teaching experience,

“When teaching... I taught [specific ethnic group]: The hardest part in the communication process is when asking them do you understand? They would say yes, even if they didn’t in order not to lose face” ... “I wasn’t given the heads up that there are nuances to the way we need to interact” (Student 1). After gaining more knowledge, the student understood with hindsight that he could have adapted his way of communicating as a teacher or worked with methods to encourage the student group to learn and adapt to the communication style of their host country.

PhD students are researching, collaborating and sometimes teaching. One student works on a Master programme that teaches modules on intercultural communication. She stated that within international business, “It is the idea that you are able to share knowledge across international borders. That you are able to utilise the benefits of what you achieve in one international market and that you are able to transfer that in another market” (Student 3). The workshop has given the students the knowledge and specific skills such as *Listening for Understanding* that they can use, first in Sweden, and then in other countries that they visit. They will be able to transfer their knowledge and skills to new places and new situations, adapting to the context whilst keeping a positive, open-minded and curious attitude.

6. Summary of findings and discussion

The students gained cultural self-awareness from the workshop; they were able to look at their own perceptions, values and communication style from a new perspective. The culture and communication knowledge gained helped them to see their colleagues in a new light and they became more aware of their interactions. Several of the students realised that they had either been ethnocentric, used hierarchical communication, listened to respond or judge and had set views about the cultures that were different to theirs.

Culture specific knowledge, culture general knowledge, knowledge about communication styles and intercultural competence helped the students to be critical about their own perceptions and to realise that there are different ways of being and behaving. For many this knowledge was new, for others it was a repetition of what they had heard in other settings, but it was of benefit to all the students present.

30 out of 39 students believed that the workshop could help them to adapt to their lives in Sweden. The knowledge from the workshop helped the students to understand important Swedish values such as Lagom; the importance of balance and not sticking out. They found that learning about norms such as consensus helped them in meetings with colleagues and to understand how to collaborate on projects, rather than there being a strong hierarchy within the research groups. The students also learned how people address one another by their first name and refrain from using titles. 37.8% of the students found culture specific knowledge to be most memorable about the workshop, compared to 27.1% who found culture general knowledge to be most memorable.

Learning about culture general knowledge evoked a new cultural self-awareness and evaluation. Students could compare their cultures' values, beliefs, norms and communication styles with that of others. It helped many students to decentre and become more ethnorelative. Many of the students expressed how useful the theoretical models of culture and intercultural competence were to gain new knowledge. Several of the students considered their DMIS in certain situations and could recognise and understand their own attitude and behaviour. Students interviewed expressed a cognitive change in their perspective and attitude since the workshop. By learning about themselves and others, the students could identify their core values and recognise situations where they then needed to be flexible to improve their interaction and/or collaboration with others. The ability to adapt whilst staying true to themselves benefits the students in their international research projects.

All but 2 of the students in both workshops had English as a Second language. Learning about different communication styles gave them a new awareness of their own communication style in their mother tongue and the influence it has when they speak English as a Second Language. There was a high interest amongst the students when taught about low-context vs. high-context cultures. Many of the students had never reflected upon communication styles and the strong influence they have during interactions.

The knowledge about different communication styles made the students reflect upon the judgements they had made about Swedes, due to their communication style. Now with more knowledge, the students changed their perspectives, were more understanding and those who were interviewed had even talked about moments where the new knowledge helped them to adapt to other people's way of communicating.

29.7% of the students found the Story Circles and *Listening for Understanding* to be most memorable about the workshop. 38 out of 39 students stated that they would continue to use this skill in their personal and professional lives. From the interviews one can note that most of the students actively thought about the knowledge gained and the skill of *Listening for Understanding* to improve their settling in period and strengthen their communication skills with others. A few of the students interviewed also expressed their desire to use this skill with others in the future when researching.

The fact that one of the Story Circles turned into a conversation needs to be reviewed for the future. Maybe it could be an idea to send out examples of story circle topics to the students prior to the workshop as suggested by one of the attending students, but then again it can take away the spontaneity of the exercise. On a positive note, everyone took part and shared an experience through an individual story.

The interviews showed that many of the students had thought about different aspects of culture and intercultural competence after the workshop. The students also expressed their gratitude about the culture specific knowledge that provided them an insight in how to behave in meetings; taking turns to speak, not speaking over others and understanding that in Sweden there is a flat power structure which places high importance on consensus.

Culture specific knowledge provoked a change in attitude amongst some students as they were able to reflect and re-consider their initial perceptions, judgement and behaviour since their arrival to Sweden and with the knowledge gained they became more open-minded and tried to understand the differences between the Swedish culture and their own, whilst remaining ethnorelative.

The culture general knowledge helped the students to evaluate their culture in relation to other cultures. The findings show that many of the students became fascinated by pinpointing traits of their own culture in relation to other cultures.

One student showed remorse about the way she had spoken to a colleague, when she realised that she had maybe been too direct and hierarchical in her verbal communication. This showed that the new knowledge allowed her to cognitively change her attitude and communication skills after the workshop.

The Story Circles gave them the opportunity to practice the intercultural skill of *Listening for Understanding*. Focusing on one skill is easy for them to do in the timeframe given. But the exercise was effective enough for the students interviewed to note that after the workshop, they were more aware of other people's communication styles and ability to listen.

Unfortunately, due to COVID19, interviews were not carried out with students from workshop two. It would have been interesting to compare their answers as the majority of the students who attended that workshop had never lived in another country.

Due to COVID19, universities around the world are temporarily closed or offering distance learning. Some students have returned to their home countries. At this current stage all future workshops have been postponed until further notice, so it is not possible to continue the study in the near future, even if it is possible to carry out the presentation via online learning and communication platforms.

Hopefully, university life will go back to normal in the future and such a workshop and methodology could be implemented in more cities or countries around the world.

7. Conclusions

In this thesis I started with the hypothesis that by offering an interactive workshop and Story Circles, giving students the possibility to gain knowledge about cultures, communication styles and intercultural competence, they may learn to change their perspectives, attain positive attitudes, such as curiosity and open-mindedness, and implement skills such as *Listening for Understanding* in their research.

The workshop succeeded in teaching students about culture specific knowledge, culture general knowledge and intercultural competence. The Story Circles and practicing the skill of *Listening for Understanding* demonstrated the importance of listening to others, and what they are expressing, rather than listening with the aim of responding or judging. Such a skill can then benefit the students when carrying out their research and within their research groups.

Culture specific and culture general knowledge, together with a clear understanding of different types of communication helped these newly arrived students to understand their host country, and the people they interact with in both private and professional settings.

Parallel to this, the students gained cultural self-awareness and could analyse their perspectives and attitudes in certain situations, in order to become more ethnorelative. The students gained a cognitive understanding of their communication styles and behaviour, and could adapt in specific situations.

New knowledge and skills, together with a positive attitude, benefit the students in their research, both in strengthening their collaboration with their peers, carrying out international research projects, and taking into consideration cultural and communication differences in their topics of research.

If all international students were offered a workshop with Story Circles at the beginning of their settling in period, they would have the tools needed to embrace and adapt to their new host country, develop critical-cultural awareness, gain assertive communication skills, and use these new assets to benefit their research.

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Appendix 1 – Surveys & Story Circle slides

Pre-workshop survey

Email address

1. When did you move to Sweden?
 - a. 1-3 months
 - b. 3-6 months
 - c. 6-12 months
 - d. Over a year
2. What countries have you lived in prior to moving to Sweden? Please list the countries.
3. What has been your biggest challenge since moving to Sweden?
4. What is the biggest cultural difference you have noticed?
5. On a scale from 1-4 how good are you at listening? (1. poor/2. good/3. very good/4. excellent)
6. Is there something specific you would like to discuss/learn about during the workshop?

Survey 1: Pre-workshop survey

Post-workshop survey

Email address

1. *What did you learn about yourself today?
2. *What common themes did you hear in the stories?
3. *What is memorable about what you have heard today?
4. Listening to understand: Is this a skill that you will continue to use in the future?
(yes / no / maybe)
5. Do you think the workshop will help you to adapt to life in Sweden?
6. How has the workshop helped you?
7. *Complete this sentence "I used to think...Now I think..."

Survey 2: Post-workshop survey (*Deardorff, 2020, p.36).

Interview questions

1. What are you studying/researching/working with?
2. Did the workshop help you during your settling in phase here in Gothenburg? If so how?
3. Have you thought about *Listening for understanding* since the workshop? In what context?
4. Do you think that the Story Circle used during the workshop gave you the opportunity to learn about others? Is this method interesting to use in your field?
5. What cultural differences have you noticed between your culture and other cultures since your arrival to Sweden?
6. What cultural challenges have you faced so far? How have you dealt with them?
7. What communication challenges have you faced (English is not everyone's mother tongue and therefore there can be miscommunication/misunderstandings).
8. Is intercultural competence a conscious part of your studies/research/work?
 - a. If so, how?
 - b. If not, is this something you can consider?

Survey 3: Interview questions

The First Story Circle question

The attendees were divided into groups of four to five people. The instructions given, were as follows:

- Take two minutes to reflect on a story in response to these questions:

*What is a memorable experience you have had with a person who is different from you? (age, religion, gender, socio-economic, culture, nationality).

What did you learn about yourself and/or the other person in that experience?

- Take five minutes each to tell the story to the other members of the circle.
- Whilst the storyteller speaks, the other members should listen to understand, not interrupt, judge or respond.

Story Circle 1 (*Deardorff, 2020, p.35).

The Second Story Circle question

The attendees remained in the same groups as before. The instructions given were as follows:

- Take 2 minutes to reflect on a story in response to this question:

*What is a memorable cultural misunderstanding you have had, and what did you learn from this?

- Take five minutes each to tell the story to the other members of the circle.
- Whilst the storyteller speaks, the other members should listen to understand, not interrupt, judge or respond.

Story Circle 2 (*Deardorff, 2020, p.35).

Appendix 2 – Figures

Sustainable Development Goals



Figure 1: UN Sustainable Development Goals (2015).

Retrieved from: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgs>

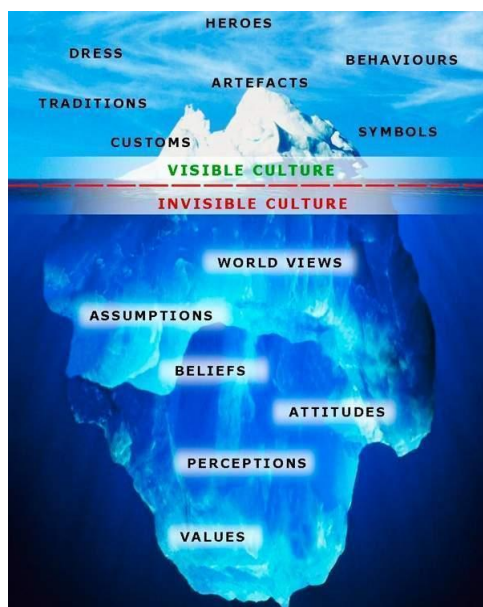


Figure 2: Hall, E.T. (1976), *The Iceberg Model*. Retrieved from:

<https://thanishnihal.home.blog/2019/04/09/organizational-culture/>

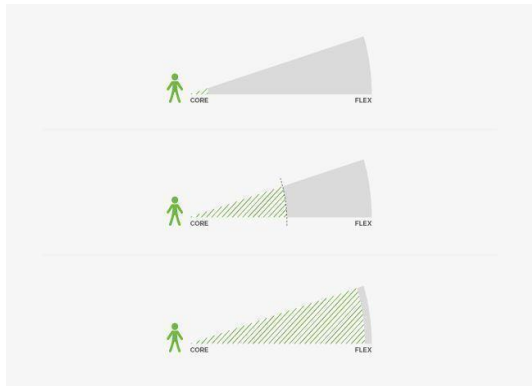


Figure 3: Middleton, Julia (2014), *The Sliding Scale*. Retrieved from: <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/cultural-intelligence/0/steps/9087>

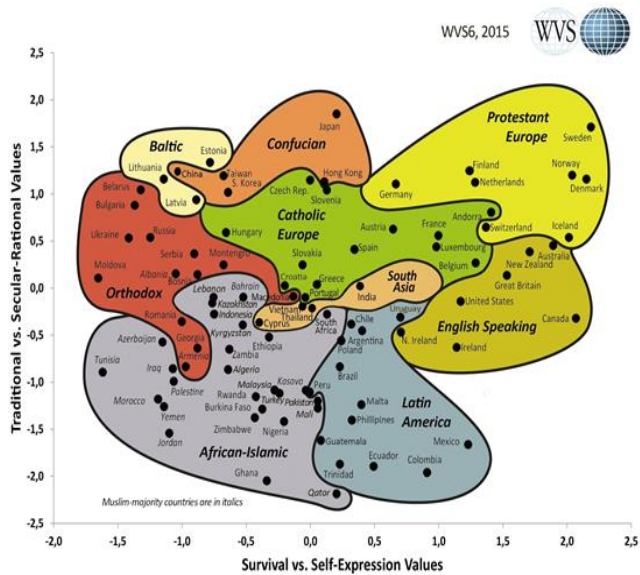


Figure 4: World Values Survey (2015). Retrieved from: <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSContents.jsp?CMSID=Findings>

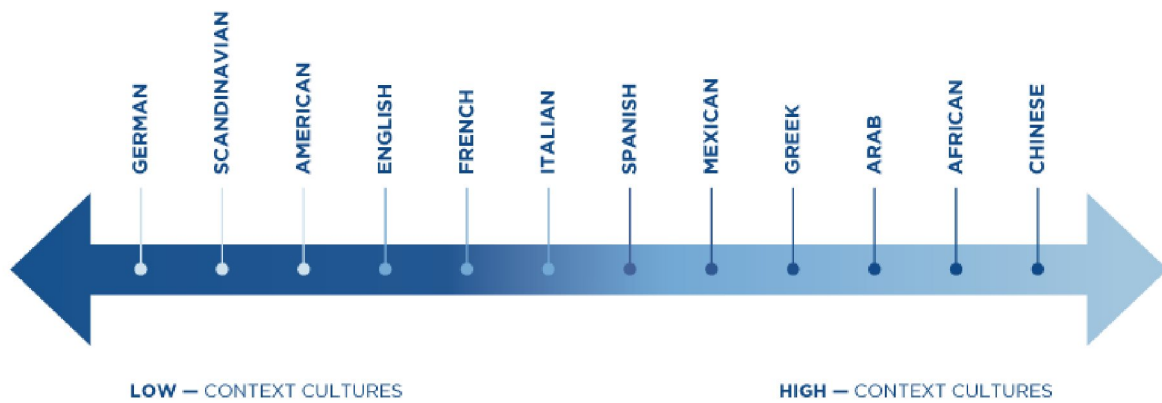


Figure 5: *Intercultural Communication: High- and Low-Context Cultures* (2016).

Retrieved from: <https://online.seu.edu/articles/high-and-low-context-cultures/>

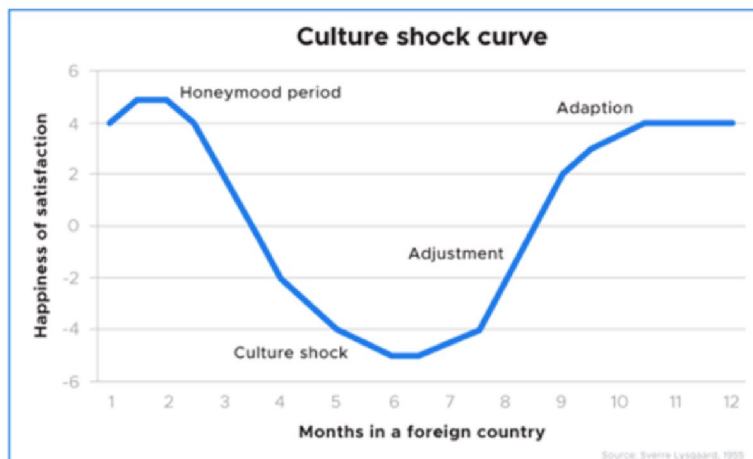


Figure 6: Lysgaard, S. (1955), *Culture shock curve*. Retrieved from:

<https://www.now-health.com/en/blog/culture-shock-stages/>

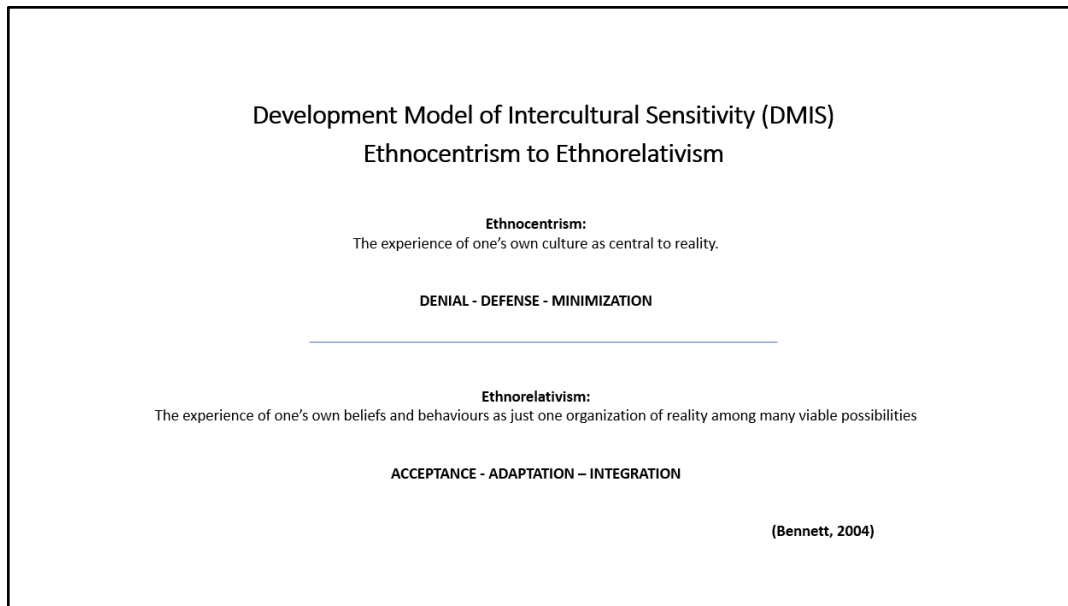


Figure 7: Bennett, M.J. (2004), *Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity*. (Own slide).

Indices

Index of tables

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|---|---|---|
| <p style="text-align: center;">HIGH Hierarchal</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">PDI Power distance</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">LOW Egalitarian</p> |
| <p style="text-align: center;">INDIVIDUALISM Focus on the individual with loose tie to a group</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">INV Individualism vs. Collectivism</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">COLLECTIVISM Strong group tie (family, community)</p> |
| <p style="text-align: center;">MASCULINITY Focus on achievement, material rewards and success</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">MAS Masculinity vs. femininity</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">FEMININITY Focus on cooperation, modesty, quality of life</p> |
| <p style="text-align: center;">HIGH Have rigid codes of beliefs and behaviour. Fear of the unfamiliar. Dislike change.</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">UAI Uncertainty avoidance index</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">LOW Relaxed approach. Comfortable with ambiguous situations. Tolerate change.</p> |
| <p style="text-align: center;">LTO Pragmatic. Encourage modern education to prepare for the future. Look at things case by case.</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">LTO Long term orientation vs Short term orientation</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">STO Value respect for traditions Strict when it comes to relationships.</p> |

Table 1: Hofstede, Geert (2010), Five out of Six dimensions of national culture. Context retrieved from: <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/cultural-intelligence> (Own slide)

Reflection - Vanessa Molina Gabinus

Aspects that have been difficult

I found that going through so much qualitative data was overwhelming at first, especially the data collected during the interviews. It became very time consuming to select and categorise the information. Everything seemed relevant to the study.

Then again, It was a shame that I was not able to interview students from workshop two as more of those students had not lived abroad before. It would have been interesting to compare the answers between the students interviewed in workshop one and two.

What has been particularly surprising about the process and results?

When interviewing the students I learned that some of them had made new friends at that workshop. It made me really happy to know that they connected with other students.

It was gratifying to hear the benefits of the workshop. One student was afraid that his supervisor did not like him, then after gaining knowledge about different communication styles, he told me that he realised that his supervisor does like him, he just has a different way of communicating. He was so relieved. I was so grateful that I (indirectly) could help someone in such a significant way.

What would I have done differently?

I would have collected more quantitative data in the pre- and post-workshop surveys to be able to compare the differences more easily of the gained knowledge and skills, as well as any change in perspective.

In the pre-workshop survey I would also have specific questions to identify the student's definition of intercultural competence.

If I could carry out a similar project...

I would really like to have some Swedish PhD students in the workshop too. This is beneficial to everyone, not just international students.

If I had the opportunity to carry out the project again. Post-workshop, I would like to work with a smaller number of students over a period of 6 months to a year, giving them first a list of 3 aims for them to carry out with colleagues and when researching. For example:

1. Practice *Listening for Understanding* at all times. Note how this affects your perspective.
2. Learn about your colleagues' cultures and communication styles.
3. Find 3 ways that your different views can positively influence your joint research.

I would then focus on a method to measure the following:

- Benefits of the culture specific, culture general and intercultural competence knowledge over a longer period of time.
- Situations when the students cognitively used intercultural competence skills to strengthen their communication, collaboration and research projects.
- Situations when the students cognitively changed their perspective to adapt to specific situations.
- How knowledge, attitude and skills benefit students in strengthening their communication, collaboration and research projects.

The data could be collected through journaling, surveys and interviews.

How the content and results of the project can be useful in a teaching context

This project can be adapted and carried out with students from ages 10yrs and older.

Such a project can be very beneficial in multicultural classrooms with newly arrived international students.

The theoretical content can then be presented according to the age group. The Story Circle questions can also be adapted to the students' age and language level.

The results show that the benefits are not just for individuals' professional lives, but also for their private lives. Story Circles make the students become vulnerable because they all share a personal story, helping to create an invisible bond between them. This can be beneficial for students at many levels to learn about one another and to become better friends.