

A Review of Arasaratnam-Smith and Deardorff (2023), *Developing Intercultural Competence in Higher Education*

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Developing Intercultural Competence in Higher Education: International Students' Stories and Self-Reflection, by Lily A. Arasaratnam-Smith and Darla K. Deardorff, was published by Routledge in 2023. The book offers an insightful exploration into the development of intercultural competence (IC) in higher education. With a total of 202 pages, this book is part of the Routledge Studies in Global Student Mobility series and is available in hardcover, paperback, and eBook formats.

In an increasingly globalized world, I believe it is essential to cultivate the ability to communicate and engage effectively and appropriately with individuals from various cultural backgrounds and holding multiple perspectives. The authors of this book argue that IC is crucial for fostering understanding, reducing stereotypes, and building meaningful relationships, all of which enable individuals to navigate cultural differences with empathy and adaptability.

Both authors are recognized scholars in the field of IC and have published extensively on the subject. The frameworks they have developed, the Integrated Model of Intercultural Communication Competence (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2006) and the Process Model of Intercultural Competence (Deardorff, 2006), are briefly introduced in the book. The former focuses on five key factors which contribute to effective intercultural communication: empathy, experience, motivation, active listening, and a positive global attitude. The latter highlights the fact that developing IC is a lifelong process, which comprises essential dimensions of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Together, these two frameworks provide a conceptual foundation for readers of this book as they engage with the personal stories and reflective practices of international students.

The book begins with a chapter that introduces and defines IC, presents the two theoretical frameworks noted above, and outlines the UNESCO Story Circle methodology used in the research being described in this book. The remainder of the book is divided into two parts: Part One, consisting of three chapters, focuses on understanding the intercultural experiences of international students, while the four chapters in Part Two address how to develop IC. In Part One, the chapters explore themes including the intersection of identity and culture (Chapter 2), stereotypes (Chapter 3), and cultural differences (Chapter 4). In Part Two, the themes are centered around the role of self-reflection (Chapter 5), community support (Chapter 6), and building meaningful relationships (Chapter 7) in the development of IC. In Chapter 8, the authors close the book by providing recommendations for international students, intercultural educators, and the broader communities in which international students live.

This structure outlined above allows readers to first understand the lived experiences of students and the importance of IC in intercultural encounters, and then to explore strategies for fostering this competence. Chapter 2 uses nine narratives to explore how international students understand and negotiate their identities in relation to language, culture, and even their names. The stories illustrate how these students reconstruct their identities through self-discovery and

interaction in an international setting. Chapter 3 presents eight stories that emphasize the idea that stereotypes are not fixed and can be overcome when individuals are motivated and open to understanding different perspectives. As the authors note, “stereotypes are neither permanent nor insurmountable” (p. 63). Chapter 4 examines the challenges that cultural differences can pose, particularly in the way that they can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts. The authors argue, however, that these differences can be bridged if individuals are willing to engage with people from diverse cultural backgrounds and to accept differences in terms of culture, race, beliefs, and communicative styles.

In Part Two, Chapter 5 introduces self-reflection as a valuable tool for developing IC. Eight reflective narratives illustrate how students recognize the importance of openness, curiosity, kindness, empathy, and respect during intercultural interactions. The stories show how reflecting on one’s privilege, biases, and stereotypes can enhance awareness and foster IC. Additionally, they demonstrate how marginalized voices can be empowered by sharing stories about discriminatory experiences, episodes of social invisibility, or other social microaggressions. Chapter 6 highlights the role of support and community in helping international students adapt to new environments and develop IC. An interesting finding from several stories is that students, after receiving support, often became supporters themselves by volunteering and creating communities for newer students. This shift empowers international students to become active contributors, rather than simply recipients of support. In Chapter 7, seven narratives are presented that demonstrate how students developed meaningful relationships during their international experiences. These relationships often began with open-mindedness and curiosity, and strengthened through compassionate actions, mutual support, and collaboration toward achieving shared goals. Notably, the relationships in these stories often extend beyond the campus environment to include local community members, co-workers, and other immigrants and international students. These members of the broader community play a crucial role in shaping the experiences of international students and fostering a sense of belonging in their new environment.

In Chapter 8, one of the authors, Lily A. Arasaratnam-Smith, shares her personal narrative as an international student at the University of Kentucky. At the very beginning of her studies, she struggled with isolation and cultural barriers. Seeking help from the international student counsellor, she was connected to a local host family, who provided essential support. This connection improved her confidence, which in turn enabled her to develop meaningful friendships with local community members and other international students. Her story highlights the importance of asking for help, having local support to build confidence, and finding a diverse social group to enhance the international experience.

As a conclusion, in Chapter 8 the authors offer several recommendations for supporting international students, addressing the perspectives of three key stakeholder groups, students, educators, and local community members. International students are encouraged to ENGAGE by embracing new experiences, nurturing relationships, growing personally, adapting to their new environment, guarding their well-being, and empathizing with others. Intercultural educators should FOSTER an inclusive environment by facilitating meaningful interactions, observing the needs of students, seeking to learn about their backgrounds, teaching cultural competencies, empowering students to succeed, and reflecting on their own practices. Finally,

local communities should SHARE support by socializing with international students, helping them adjust, accepting cultural differences, respecting diverse perspectives, and empathizing with their experiences. These recommendations aim to enhance the overall experience of international students, promote positive intercultural interactions, and build a supportive environment for all involved.

Developing Intercultural Competence in Higher Education offers valuable insights into the intercultural experiences of international students, illuminates key factors influencing intercultural communication, and provides effective methods for developing IC; yet there are aspects of the research that may leave readers wanting more. For example, the authors claim that the UNESCO Story Circle methodology was utilized, a process which typically involves four to six participants gathering in a circle and sharing their stories in response to certain prompts (Deardorff, 2020). However, no details are given about the application of this methodology or whether participants actually shared their stories in this manner, which raises questions about the data collection process. Also, the authors mention that 48 narratives (plus an additional narrative shared by one of the authors) were selected from over 150 submissions, but there are no details on the selection criteria. This omission leaves readers wondering why these particular stories were chosen. In addition, although the first-hand narratives are powerful in illustrating experiences in intercultural communication, the commentaries that follow each story are generally brief, usually limited to one paragraph. These commentaries offer only a short summary and discussion of the experiences, challenges, cultural differences, or key elements of IC. A more detailed and comprehensive analysis of the narratives in relation to existing literature and IC theories would enrich the reader's understanding.

Despite these minor criticisms, there are many reasons why I find this book compelling. The language is natural, smooth, and engaging, making it both easy to follow and emotionally resonant. The use of first-person narratives effectively captures the real-life experiences and emotions of international students, allowing me, a reader who is an international student and who experiences intercultural encounters on a daily basis, to connect with the stories on a personal level. The commentaries from authors provide insightful interpretations of these experiences and highlight the challenges and key elements of intercultural communication competence, as well as how this competence can be cultivated. This approach allows readers to observe and understand the development of IC through authentic lived experiences. Additionally, each chapter concludes with a list of guiding questions to encourage further self-reflection, which transforms reading the book into an interactive and thought-provoking learning experience.

Overall, this book illuminates the intercultural communication experiences of international students and offers practical tools for enhancing IC and related skills. The blend of storytelling, self-reflection, and theoretical foundations makes it an invaluable resource for anyone interested in IC and international education. I highly recommend *Developing Intercultural Competence in Higher Education* for students preparing for or currently studying abroad, and for researchers, educators, and policymakers who are seeking to improve intercultural programs and support systems for international students.

References

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