The Liminal Space for Intercultural Learning: an Empirical Study among Undergraduate International Business Students[1]

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The field of Intercultural Communication has attracted attention of specialists from various disciplines, including such distant fields of research as linguistics and international business studies. Most authors, however, focus on the scope of knowledge and skills in terms of learning objectives. Students' own perspectives and various conceptions they construct with ascribed meanings, as well as the "architecture" of their learning process remain under-researched. This study provides an example of a replicable analysis of the Intercultural Communication learning process, based on subjects' perspectives. Most participants of this study are first- and second-generation immigrants. Serious issues present in a multicultural setting based on the perception of the "Other" emerged, with implications for communication, collaboration and potential conflict. Two main transformation patterns were identified in the intercultural learning process, conditioned by mono- and multiculturalism. This study reveals a range within the self-conception transition framework, as well as the deep ontological aspect of the phenomenon. The findings extrapolated into a wider context should contribute to a more conflict-free environment in multicultural societies in general. The phenomenographic approach, variation theory and the threshold concept were applied to explore the semantics, the syntax of the learning process and the critical aspects of the transformative learning experience.

Keywords: intercultural learning, liminal space, phenomenography, variation theory, sustainability

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Introduction

Discourse between members of different socio-cultural systems seems an obvious way to maintain peaceful co-existence. Attempts to conduct such a discourse, however, often fail, due to the lack of a common mediated platform for effective communication. Creating such a platform is difficult and requires the participation of a mediator (Dusi, Messetti, Steinbach 2014: 542). Semantic and ontological differences seem to be the underlying issue, as this study suggests. This pilot study exemplifies how an intercultural learning experience can lead to a deep epistemological and ontological transformation. It can support the construction of transcultural identity and building interconnectedness instead of isolation between cultural groups (Welsch, 1999: 205). A related concept of transnational transition has been indicated as a new direction in the field of research focused on migrant children and youth (Pustułka P., Trąbka A. 2019).

The multicultural environment of Calgary, the third largest city in Canada[3], located in the western province of Alberta, where the study took place, enabled an interesting sample in this context. Foreign-born Calgarians constituted 20.6% of the total population of the city in 2011 (Statistics Canada 2011). According to the Calgary Metropolitan Area census (2017), there has been 3.2% growth of the immigrant population since 2011. Such a multicultural environment calls for a broad inclusion of Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) instruction in a variety of curricula. The existing literature refers to such components of ICC as: an emic view of other cultures (Byram 2014), the ability to relativize one's own cultural perspective (Alred, Byram, & Fleming 2006), the ability to empathize (Nordgren 2017). The above skills and knowledge are not, however, easy to acquire, and undergo subjective interpretation (Grimshaw & Sears 2008: 264). This qualitative study, conducted at Mount Royal University, among a culturally diverse student population was preceded by observation of differences in the way students approach and formulate concepts crucial for understanding of other cultures' emic perspectives, i.e., the insider's perspective (Pike 1967). Some behavioral patterns influencing collaboration in a multicultural classroom had been consistent (i.e., tendency to work within homogenous groups, disagreements between members of more diverse groups, followed by the exclusion of a member), which revealed the group incoherence problem. Thus, gaining students' own perspectives on the intercultural learning process emerged as the main framework. Existing curricula focus mostly on the content to be learned and on the deconstruction of knowledge (Nordgren 2017: 665). Students' insights can help expand our awareness of different ways the knowledge is being reconstructed. Thus, methodology based on the phenomenographic approach (Marton 1986), variation theory (rooted in phenomenography) and the threshold concept were applied in this study to grasp the variety of conceptions formed by students, different "architecture"

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of the learning process, and the variation in transformation patterns. As this study shows, all three aspects are closely intertwined.

Most participants were multicultural; they internalized two or more cultural schemas, defined as "generalized collections of knowledge" (Nishida 2005: 404), and identified with more than one culture (Fitzsimmons, Liao & Thomas 2017). However, a small sample of monocultural subjects[4] allowed for a comparison and wider contextualization of the project. Multicultural individuals have been described as having "more social capital and higher levels of intercultural skills than those with fewer cultural identities" (Fitzsimmons et al. 2017: 87). Can we, however, assume that a multicultural background itself guarantees success in the global professional context? The current study answers this question as well as provides examples of epistemological and ontological shift among some Monoculturals. A meaningful transformation was possible due to the inclusion of the environmental sustainability aspect. The term sustainability was presented to students as referring to the broad context of sociocultural and natural environment (Manenti 2011).

The value of collaborative learning among students in class as well as discourse with teachers is undeniable in terms of our students' future development. "The realm of formation and transformation" has been emphasized by Richard Gale (2016: 16). It is the transformational component observed among participants that provided a broader theoretical framework for analysis. Not only did subjects internalize the core meanings related to course concepts, the epistemological transformation was accompanied by a deeper ontological shift. There was a dramatic shift in self-perception among participants as they navigated the multidimensional and polysemic context of other cultural systems. The ontological aspect of transformation refers here to existential identity (Ashman & Gibson 2010). The learning process continued throughout the study, including the last interviews (several students volunteered to participate in two or three interviews). This study attempts to answer the three fundamental questions crucial for understanding of the intercultural learning process. The research questions refer to the various conceptions developed by students in relation to the course material, the structure of the learning process, and a meaningful transformation experienced as a result of participation in these courses. The analysis provides a "map" of transformation patterns identified among the participants.

In terms of the methodology, this study exemplifies how the integration of the phenomenographic approach (Marton & Booth 1997), variation theory, and the application of the threshold concept support the analysis of the intercultural learning process. The rationale for the integration of these approaches can be summarized as follows: the phenomenographic interpretive approach enables an exploration of the different ways subjects experience and perceive the same phenomena and the relation between human beings and the world (Marton 1986). This approach, however, is limited to providing a description of various interpretations (Holmquist & Mattison 2008).

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[4] Individuals who identify with one socio-cultural system

Variation theory enables the analysis of the syntax behind the learning process and identification of the critical aspects of the process (Holmquist & Mattison 2008). Such "thick" description satisfies the new phenomenographic approach (Pang 2003), according to what researchers describe as the critical aspects of phenomena that are discerned by subjects. The application of the threshold concept enables analysis of emerging new meanings – the result of the ontological and epistemological shift (Land, Meyer & Baille 2010).

Participants of the study were all volunteers recruited by research assistants in two courses: Cross-Cultural Management (two groups) and International Marketing (one group). Between Fall 2013 and Fall 2014, informed consent forms and questionnaires were distributed and collected by research assistants. Participants were mostly International Business students, both women and men, of various cultural backgrounds (i.e., Euro-Canadians, immigrants from Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Iran, Bangladesh, Nicaragua, and Russia), between the ages of twenty and twenty-five. The total number of participants was twenty, a number consistent with phenomenographic study that is usually based on a sample of up to twenty participants, as there is only a limited number of qualitatively distinct ways a phenomenon can be understood (Marton 1986).

The structure of data analysis is based on the three main stages of transformation, with the corresponding themes that emerged from questionnaires and interviews. The pre-liminal stage illustrates various "points of departure" among participants – it involves ways of experiencing otherness (theme 1) and cross-cultural adaptation patterns (theme 2). The liminal stage reveals threshold concepts, the identification of which is crucial for deeper understanding of the learning process. This stage evolves around the building blocks of reality construction, such as shifting perception of time and space (theme 3), experienced epiphanies (theme 4). It also illustrates the learning syntax (theme 5). The post-liminal stage involves re-framed self-conception (theme 6) and pathways to cultural metacognition (theme 7).

Additional data analysis resulted from this study, revealing perceptions of such phenomena, as: the academic space per se, co-existence in the multicultural society, and sustainability of intercultural environment (briefly summarized in the Findings and Discussion section).The details regarding the research procedure have been presented as appendix.

Data Analysis

In terms of initial analysis, a phenomenon is considered the common platform from both phenomenographic and variation theory standpoints (Rovio-Johansson & Ingerman 2016). The relation: subjects – phenomena and concepts related to various cultures constitute the main field of this research. The analysis of data (i.e., questionnaires, exams and in-depth interviews) is presented as a process of exploration, due to its inductive nature. There is no uniform way of conducting a phenomenographic

analysis (Åkerlind 2005), although there is a common understanding that categories of description and emerging themes should be presented as reflecting various ways of experiencing a phenomenon (Marton & Booth 1997). Results are presented as the outcome spaces.

Pre-liminal stage. This stage is characterized by "troublesomeness" in learners' subjectivity (Land et al. 2010). All participants referred to a dilemma experienced in the past when asked about their cross-cultural encounters. The analysis of the content of questionnaires revealed a dichotomy wherein two main groups emerged: monoculturals and multiculturals. The first group presented itself as quite diverse. As based on the data in this study, this category could be applied to all individuals who, regardless of the country of residence, identify exclusively with their country of origin. Therefore, the category comprises two sub-categories: Euro- Canadians (Monocultural 1), and new immigrants (Monocultural 2). The multicultural group revealed significant complexity and depth in terms of cross-cultural experience. Self-conceptions emerged as highly meaningful to the participants' learning process.

Theme 1. Different ways of experiencing otherness. Experience of cultural "otherness" prior to taking the course turned out to be of crucial importance to participants. Questionnaires that preceded interviews revealed a variety of experiences in relation to the "Other".

Category 1. *Monoculturals.* Both monocultural sub-groups experienced otherness as a contrast to their own cultural schemas. The first sub-group shared dilemmas resulting from differences between individualistic, low-context and collectivistic, high-context cultures:

> I am a Caucasian Canadian, born and raised. We never travelled when I was young. Then, in Mexico, watching this wedding – how people kiss and hug each other was so weird.

Another monocultural, who proudly refers to having accompanied her father overseas on multiple occasions, described a shocking difference between her concept of "home" and what she had seen in Malaysia:

> I went with my dad to Malaysia when I was eleven. It was a culture shock…seeing whole families in those tiny cubicles.

The second sub-group (monocultural 2) provided an insight into the way Canadians may be perceived by members of collectivistic, high-context cultures:

> I am from India. It felt very lonely when I came to Canada. They were cold.

Limited interaction among strangers and social distance contributed to the feeling of "loneliness", as she explained. The expression "cold" also speaks to the differences in displaying emotions between high- and low-context cultures (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997).

Category 2. Multicultural participants. The significance of physical appearance and multi-layered structure of self emerged.

> I look very Egyptian; I am minority here in Canada.

An awareness of his physical appearance, as based on social perception, determined the self-conception of the participant. A dramatic statement was shared by another multicultural participant:

> I have this "Middle-Eastern" look, you know, so they always suspect me of something when I am at the airport.

As based on participants' narratives, both monocultural sub-groups experienced "otherness" in contrast with their own cultural schemas. The common dualistic framework ["me" – "not me"] emerged. Monocultural participants (1 and 2) represent an explicitly binary perspective, according to which the "other" culture remains outside the "norm" (i.e., "not me"). In the case of multicultural participants, however, the boundaries of otherness become more fluid, as the "Other" is embedded in their self- conception (as shown in Table 1). Thus, what multicultural participants perceive as an identifier ascribed to them by the mainstream society constitutes a significant aspect of self-conception. The term "self-conception" is used here as congruent with the phenomenographic approach to learning. The conception changes over time, as this study confirms. Multicultural participants showed the most depth in their narratives, since a self-observing agent had been present in their representation of [I – the world] encounters.

Table 1

Outcome Space: Different Ways of Experiencing "Otherness"
(Data organized according to the depth of self-reflection)

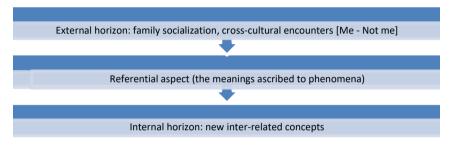| Cultural background	How experienced	Variation
Monocultural 1 Monocultural 2	By contrast	External view
Multicultural	By inward-looking	Internalized "Other" [meta-awareness]

Source: the author's own research.

The structure of awareness in the pre-liminal stage. The syntax of the pre-liminal stage emerges from in-depth interviews. The key term that was spontaneously used by most interviewees was "home". The first interviewee, who identified herself as a Canadian of Iranian origin, used the expression "back home" repetitively to explain her understanding of concepts pertaining to collectivistic societies. When asked about the connection: "home" – Iran, she reflected for a while and said:

> I say "home", because my parents refer to Iran this way, so it is natural.
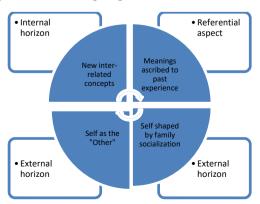
She seemed surprised by this reflection, though. All the other multicultural participants initially described their self-conception in a similar way, i.e., following their parents' cultural roots. At this pre-liminal stage, the syntax behind the process is rooted in family socialization and experiences as an outsider. The term "internal horizon" signifies the process of association of the course-specific inter-related concepts (Marton & Booth 1997). The external horizon represents context or perceptual boundary. The referential aspect remains closely connected with the external horizon, revealing meanings ascribed to phenomena. Monoculturals seem to ascribe meanings in a linear way as based on family socialization (as shown in Figure 1).

Figure 1

The structure of the pre-liminal learning stage, of linear nature (monocultural participants).

External horizon: family socialization, cross-cultural encounters [Me - Not me]

Referential aspect (the meanings ascribed to phenomena)

Internal horizon: new inter-related concepts

Self-perception as the "other" plays a significant role in the case of multiculturals. External horizon is based on personal experience in which family socialization constitutes the "point of departure" and forms a component of the discursive space where negotiation of self-conception takes place. Concepts pertaining to other cultures (internal horizon) are processed by the self that already contains "the other" conception as a norm (as shown in Figure 2).

Figure 2

The structure of the pre-liminal learning stage, of circular nature (multicultural participants).

- Internal horizon
- Referential aspect

New inter-related concepts

Meanings ascribed to past experience

Self as the "Other"

Self shaped by family socialization

- External horizon
- External horizon

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Theme 2. Cross-cultural adaptation patterns. Subjects' adaptation patterns emerged as a salient aspect of their cross-cultural experience.

Category 1. Maladaptation. Two main layers of maladaptation emerged from interviews: expectation-based and developmental stage-based. In the first case there was not a clear difference between home culture and host culture per se, but the expected similarity between two cultures that contributed to maladaptation.

> What was so annoying about Australia was that it was so similar to North America, but slightly different. Just because I was expecting Australia to be like Canada, it bothered me so much. (Monocultural 1)

In the second case, culture shock had been magnified by the age factor and the corresponding psychosocial developmental stage. The subject immigrated to Canada with his family when he was four. At this age, children experience the "initiative vs guilt" conflict (Erikson 1963) and tend to initiate activities with others. If the environment perceives their initiative negatively, a sense of guilt develops, which hinders the willingness and motivation to undertake any initiative.

> I came to Canada when I was four. My father was French, my mother Ethiopian and we lived in Ethiopia and in Italy prior to coming here. I was used to hugging other children, but at the preschool here the principal asked my mother to correct my behavior around other kids. So now I prefer to do my own thing.

This component of his narrative, congruent with Erikson's theory, explains the roots of the participant's withdrawal in class. Other multicultural participants specifically emphasized separation and experienced Islamophobia as the reasons for potential conflicts:

> Separation – identifying people as Muslims creates separation – it creates conflict. (A participant from South Asia).

Category 2. Interactive approach to cross-cultural adaptation. Most multicultural participants revealed an interactive approach to adaptation:

> I go with the flow. My brothers who recently studied in America basically gave me what to expect, so I didn't have any problems. (A student from the Middle East)

The variation range extends from maladaptation to positive interactive engagement, based on expectations towards the other culture. Maladaptation emerged as a phenomenon with long-lasting consequences if the culture shock was experienced at a vulnerable psychosocial developmental stage. Islamophobia was highlighted as a "trigger" for conflict.

Liminal stage. This stage constitutes "a transformative state in the process of learning, in which there is a reformulation of the learner's meaning frame and an

accompanying shift in the learner's ontology" (Land et al. 2014: 199). The pre-liminal stage signaled the appearance of a "fuzzy", ambiguous space in participants' subjectivity, as their cultural schema lacks compatibility with the phenomena encountered in other cultures. To construct a meaning of a different reality, students need to experience discernment of cultural differences first. They need to reflect on their "point of departure", experience variation through the introduction of separate aspects of a culture, followed by fusion of aspects that enables simultaneity (i.e., perceiving aspects of another culture as components of a different construct), according to variation theory (Åkerlind 2015; Holmquist & Mattisson 2008). Thus, learning begins (as this study shows) when students are presented with patterns of variation and distinguish the critical aspects of a given phenomenon. Discernment enables students to focus on one aspect of culture at a time. For instance, the relationship-based time approach was presented and analyzed in class as a complete "unit" of analysis, as well as an element of the whole cultural system. Thus, contextualization of the temporal approach facilitated the experience of simultaneity. Variation helps view cultures as unique and opens minds to a polysemic space. Culture was introduced as a matrix of meanings (Geertz 1973) and deconstructed according to Edward Hall's concepts of *high-* and *low-context* culture, and *proxemic behavior* defined as "the study of how man unconsciously structures micro space" (1963: 1003). Such concepts as: malleability of time (Dali 1931), *collectivism* vs. *individualism* (Hofstede 1980), *affectivity* (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner 1998) and *cultural schema* (Nishida 2005) were also presented in class and remained central to participants' discourse. Sociolinguistic differences and multiple examples from my own professional experience overseas also provided a tangible context.

Threshold Concepts. Threshold concepts are vital to this analysis, as processing them requires integration of previous experience with a new conceptual framework that sheds new light on the relationship [I-the world]. These concepts, closely related to "troublesomeness in a liminal space of learning" (Land et al. 2014: 199), open a symbolic window to a transformed view of cultures and one's own position in the diverse, polysemic reality.

Theme 3. Perception of time and space. Temporal and spatial perceptions constitute components of liminality borders, abstract differentials between the Self and the "Other" (De Luca Picione & Valsiner 2017: 533). These two aspects of reality construction are also crucial to intercultural understanding and communication.

Category 1. Differences in perception of time across cultures. Monoculturals (1) critically approached polychronic time perception, i.e., time perceived as flexible, relationship-based (Hall & Hall 1990), as contrasted with their own monochronic, linear approach. Experienced variation in this dimension (how time is organized) stands out:

> I am super time-oriented and in Africa time is based off events. I can see that's where problems would start.

Monoculturals clearly discern the collectivistic temporal approach and describe it as a "not- me" phenomenon. Multiculturals showed deeper inter-connections between concepts and used broader contextualization, indicative of simultaneity. They were also able to point out subtle differences between individualistic societies and apply more course concepts:

> Latin America uses intangible time. They focus more on people and circumstances rather than scheduling and punctuality. Canada is considered individualistic; however, it is more collectivistic than Germany. (A participant from Nicaragua).

Multiculturals analyzed cultures more in depth in terms of time perception. Their learning experience involves all three aspects of learning (discernment, simultaneity and variation), whereas Monoculturals' experience reflects mainly discernment at this stage.

Category 2. Space perception and emergence of sacred space.
Space was perceived by Monoculturals (1) as exclusively pertaining to their individual cultural "territory":

> I spend a lot of time in north-east Calgary and you see plenty of places of worship and stuff like that. I think it's impactful because it is not that their culture is bothering me, but they are taking up the culture that I used to have in that singular space and putting their own in it.

A feeling of loss of an important aspect of the subject's identity reveals a salient meaning of public space to self-concept construction.
A journey through a transition zone from secular, "singular", tangible space to a spiritual, intangible realm emerged:

> I have been to church a couple times (…), it makes me a little bit uncomfortable because I know I don't feel the same feeling toward it as the people around me, or when I see other people's practices. It is way over my head. I have no understanding of like why they feel they need to ask a higher power or something that isn't physically there. (Monocultural 1, 1st interview)

This participant wonders about the meaning of religious practices in general and frames the issue as a "feeling". There is more depth to this polysemic zone than the use of physical space; a deeper semantic layer of processing takes place here, triggered by the question about the need for religious practices in general. The meaning of space as a spiritual construct per se, even abstracted from the Canadian context, emerged from another interview in this sub-group:

Seeing whole families in those tiny cubicles and they dedicate half of the space to gods!

Religious beliefs are perceived as a less relevant aspect of culture than the preservation of personal space. The spatial aspect (regarding physical space) did not seem to constitute "troublesomeness" to multicultural participants. When asked about differences in time perception, they would point out to the concept of private space and subtle differences among individualistic cultures.

> The difference between public and private space in individualistic societies. Germans need more privacy than we do. (A student from South Asia)

The concept of sacred mental space, viewed as a product of "semiotic integration" (Brandt 2005: 1586) within the context of Islam, however, implicitly emerged in the context of Arabic language and its meaning to Muslim participants. The role of language was highlighted by a multicultural participant regarding his culture of origin:

> It is my language, the language of my religion. We speak nothing but Arabic at home.

Classical Arabic, the language of the Koran, is considered sacred in Arab countries (Hall 1989).

Variation range extends from the experience of differences between the secular, exclusive space-approach to a spiritual, collectivistic use of space. Deep ontological questions characterized insights by Monoculturals (1). The implicitly experienced concept of sacred mental space emerged among Muslim participants who speak Arabic.

Theme 4. Epiphanies. Epiphanies play an important role in the learning process. A concept conveyed in an understandable way, a meaningful interaction with students from other cultures helped evoke these "aha" moments. One of the multicultural participants characterized epiphanies as follows:

> You were always thinking of something and all of the sudden a window opens, and you learned something!

Category 1. Concept of cultural schema and cultural script. The concept of cultural schema was discussed in class to facilitate understanding of phenomena behind the matrix of behavioral patterns. The concept proved to serve as a useful "tool" for gradual association of the inter-related aspects of culture.

> It stood out for me when we had to dissect an advertising campaign for the project. Being able to view cultures layer by layer, breaking it down, being able to understand a cultural schema, it was very helpful. (Monocultural 1)

The association between beliefs and observable behaviors indicates the emergence of simultaneity. The next quote reflects a reversed process, i.e. analysis of individualistic cultures:

> I am from a collectivistic culture, so when we spoke about cultural schema and business structures in individualistic societies in class, I had a couple of aha moments! (Mono-cultural 2)

The concept was also found useful by multiculturals:

> Cultural schema totally appeals to me. (…) to be able to navigate something so massive, I had to understand that kind of relationship between someone's schema and actions (A participant from Bangladesh)

The application of course concepts allowed for the systematic analysis and un-derstanding of culturally conditioned behavioral patterns. Another participant who had immigrated to Canada from Iraq, recognized the difference between cultural schemas as he reflected on a memorable experience. During a visit by another Iraqi family at his parents' place in Calgary, he invited his peer from this family to a pub, which was seriously frowned upon by the other family.

> This Iraqi family was judging my behavior, which was kind of insulting to my Canadian sub-self.

A Canadian "sub-self" concept emerged, which reflects the participant's develop-ing self-awareness. The cultural script concept[5] was also mentioned by multiculturals:

> Being able to understand how a culture script in certain situations could be affected from the underlying beliefs was very helpful. (A participant from Middle East).

A common experience, i.e., the connection between the cultural schema and behavioral patterns provided a breakthrough. Both groups found it an effective ana-lytical tool.

Category 2. The affective aspect of intercultural communication. Interaction with in-ternational students helped monocultural (1) participants relativize their perspective:

> There was an individual from Germany, it was weird for him to come to Canada, where everyone is smiling "hey, how's it going", it kind of made me realize that if I was him in another situation like me in Germany, it would be the same like this is really weird … Yeah that just really in particular just made me realize it is not all the same.

The emergence of empathy allows for the development of a perspective-taking ability. What had seemed "normal" to the participant was perceived as over-emotional by the German student. A growing awareness of multiplicity of perspectives across cultures emerged.

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[5] "unconscious mental representations that shape how we think and act in a given situation" (Abel-son 1981, as cited in Thomas and Peterson 2015: 71).

The affective-linguistic aspect of intercultural learning was stressed by a multi-cultural participant (with relatively short experience in Canada):

When we read in the original form, we can understand what the writer is saying with emotion. There is an emotional persuading context, it makes it easier to convince you.

Learning about the need to connect with other cultures on an emotional level helped another multicultural (raised in Canada) to release this (dormant) need:

I always approach situations analytically, whereas this class showed me that if I don't act more emotionally, I might miss out, not be able to interact with another culture…that was an issue for me not being able to…it was an awakening for me. This classroom offered that kind of awareness for me now (A participant from Bangladesh).

A variety of insights emerged; from the realization that there is a meaningful range within the affective dimension to intercultural communication, accompanied by an empathetic experience of those differences (monocultural1), to the realization of how the emotional aspect of interpersonal interactions can effectively help communicate with the "Other", and a broader view on intercultural communication, involving the affective-linguistic component (a multicultural with short Canadian experience).

Category 3. Perception of cultural and natural environments in the context of sustainability. The dimension humans-environment was introduced in class as an additional cross-cultural concept, based on Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's (1961) Cultural Value Orientations theory. By emphasizing this dimension, I aimed at expanding the students' conceptual lenses and helped them acquire a more holistic approach to intercultural discourse. The realization that cultural lenses determine how the relationship is viewed in a given society provided another epiphany to a monocultural (1):

I wouldn't normally think of them together, culture and nature, but I guess if you look at cultures that are more, like, harmonious with nature like Japanese culture, they would probably have greater respect for environmental sustainability.

An important association was achieved by this participant, indicative of simultaneity. The concept of harmony between the human and natural world may have opened a window to the connection with something greater than oneself.
Multicultural subjects focused on the degree of variation across cultures and the need for "partnership" with nature if a sustainable integration is to be achieved:

We talked in class about man's relationship with nature, whether people view their environment as resources to be dominated or as natural givers that must be balanced with.

The emphasis on "oneness" of the human-natural world was expressed by another multicultural, as tied to sustainability:

> Nature and humanity need not to be considered separate and opposing forces but inter-connected. It is vital if nature and humanity are to integrate sustainably. (A participant from Nicaragua).

The variation range extends from epiphany (cultures determine how humans relate to nature) among monoculturals (1) to holistic awareness, associated with sustainability, among multiculturals.

Theme 5. Learning syntax. Distinct learning patterns emerged in both groups.

Category 1. Structured, independent. An individual, structured, pre-planned process emerged in the monocultural (1) group:

> For exams, I always read a lot. I read the textbook, all my notes, I follow the study questions. When I am to write a term paper, it takes a while. I do research, I read.

Category 2. Mixed pattern: semi-interactive.

> I liked how the professor had a lot of examples…it helped make the connection between the material and real life, I also read the textbook from cover to cover. I would take pictures of her slides and review them. Her examples have really helped me feel empathetic and inside the culture.

Examples conveyed in class supported the learning process, structured around reading. Empathy enabled the understanding of emic perspectives. Inter-subjective learning among students took place (direct experience):

> When this German student said we smile too much, it stood out for me.

Category 3. Collaborative, interdependent. Some multiculturals showed strong team-work "survival" skills, despite an initial rejection by the "Other":

> If they don't like you, they don't want to be in your team. You've got to make it work, no matter what. (A student from Egypt).

An additional facilitator's significance was indicated by a multicultural participant:

> I need to talk with my girlfriend first. She will say how she understands it and then I can do my own analysis.

The variation range extends from independent, structured through mixed approach (monoculturals 1), to the interdependent, collaborative approach (multiculturals).

The meaning of academic, discursive space per se emerged as a significant sub-theme. Significant implications for communication patterns in the multicultural society were also revealed (see: Findings and Discussion section).

Post-liminal Stage. At this stage, participants have crossed the abstract borders viewed as a "distinction made within a homogenous field" (De Luca Picione & Valsiner 2017:533) that used to separate Self from the "Other". The result of an ontological and epistemological shift in subjects' awareness was characterized by semantic integration that enabled the re-positioning of the self. Thus, one can view some aspects of the post-liminal shift as occurring in convergence with a discourse around dimensions of identity/ "territories of the self"[6].

Theme 6. Re-framed self-conception. The existential need to define one's identity was expressed by a multicultural participant:

> We need to know who we are to survive. (Multicultural from Middle East).

Category 1. Reformulation of the "sheath". Re-framing the "sheath" aspect of self, or the outer layer of the body (Goffman 1971: 30), played a big role in multiculturals' transition. The extent to which appearance may determine one's sense of identity and how this burden can be removed is illustrated by the quote below:

> I was never identified as someone being close to the majority, in Canada. When I got into this accident in Tanzania, the driver got totally messed up and said:" Of all the people I could have crashed with, I had to crash with this Canadian kid. Now my life is over". They called me mazungo, which means a Westerner, a white person. That blew my mind. I'm not white. It totally enhanced my sense of self. (A participant from Bangladesh).

Defining a multicultural person as "white" (in a third cultural realm) allows for breaking out of the binary stereotype ("minority" vs. "majority"). Implicitly, the subject realizes that it is the observer's perceptual lenses and not a fixed reality that influences his self-perception in any given social context. Thus, he comes to the realization:

> I would call myself a citizen of the world before I would call myself Bangladeshi or Canadian. (3rd interview).

The analogy between self-perception and the observer effect comes to mind[7]. By extrapolating this concept into the interpersonal communication context, one may admit that observation by others collapses the inner spectrum of multiple self-aspects into just one.

Category 2. Discarding the material frame of "being". The affective pathway to holistic understanding. The affective component of the learning process played a significant role in the monocultural (1) approach to intangible, sacred mental space:

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[6] Term coined by Goffman (1971).

[7] Any conscious observation causes, in quantum-mechanical terms, a collapse of the wave function; the wave of potentialities collapses into just one possibility (see Wolf 2011: 443).

> I had no understanding why they feel they have to ask a higher power that isn't physically here. Now, I can empathize with certain cultures. I think gaining knowledge from these courses has really helped me understand and empathize with certain cultures that have that need for an upper power (2nd interview).

The affective aspect of the learning process, evoked by class collaboration, enabled acceptance of a relativistic view on space (seen as *sacrum* by the "Other"):

> As far as Aboriginal culture and their values, I am sure they feel we are infringing on their space and the practices they want to hold onto, and we are enforcing ours onto theirs (2nd interview).

The abstract border between secular and spiritual space has thus been demystified, once the need for broadly viewed sustainability was understood and incorporated. The emotional "block" had been removed, which enabled a learning experience:

> I have learned to be more accepting because you meet people and you realize they are not all practicing all these really harsh religions. It is hard when they come to other countries because people don't take the time to understand and really get to know them. (Monocultural 1, 2nd interview)

It seems that the implicit essentialist approach used to form a barrier in communication with the "Other". The learning experience enabled a breakthrough, it gave rise to curiosity and the need for immersion in another cultural reality.

> Before, I watched the news and had my assumptions (…) but now all the examples made me curious to learn about the cultures and immerse myself in them. This summer, I am going to Kenia, to do some volunteering. I think this class has pushed me to doing *it* (Monocultural 1, 2nd interview)

Theme 7: Pathway to cultural metacognition.

Category 1. Sensitization to other cultures' intrinsic values. Some monocultural participants shifted from culture shock to recognition of other cultures' idiosyncrasies.

> We need to see other cultures as unique. (Monocultural 1)

This transition marks a meaningful step towards cultural metacognition, the term referring to "the skills in reflecting on cultural assumptions in order to prepare for, adapt to, and learn from intercultural interactions" (Chua, Morris, & Mor 2012: 116).

Category 2. Discarded "othering", gained metacognition. The ultimate border dividing the "me-not me" frame of mind into "we" perspective has been challenged by some participants in both groups.

I got more and more curious, and I think it is cool that so many people are so different and that it is like we are not just one big universe, we are a million of different things! (Monocultural 1)

Real appreciation of diversity and polysemy across cultures emerged; this transition marks an existential and perceptual breakthrough.

The affective aspect of learning may also have "unlocked" deeper layers of empathy and comprehension of the "Other" among multiculturals. Reflection on the course concepts extrapolated into past events resulted in a solution to a dilemma that one of the subjects had been struggling with for years:

When I went to Tanzania, I was challenging my own preconceptions. I talked to a village family whether they'd be interested in getting their child into a school, where maybe the child would have a better life. His parents said they wouldn't be interested. That blew my mind, I was shocked. I would think they should be pushing toward a better lifestyle, but maybe they found certain kind of happiness I wouldn't understand until now that we're having this interview (3rd Interview)

Conceptual tools provided in class enabled him to apply metacognitive analysis:

I tend to think on the metacognitive level often, but I have never had an opportunity to actually engage that kind of thinking until I went to this class.

A common experience was revealed, i.e., extension of the self beyond dualistic lenses (I – the Other"), at the deepest layer of transformation in both groups.

Findings and Discussion

This study was undertaken to explore the variety of conceptions constructed by students, the learning syntax, and meaningful transformation patterns within the field of Intercultural Communication. The findings expanded beyond the initial range of questions, with the cross-cultural conflict-related current emerging as a salient theme, relevant to communication in any multicultural society. The semantics and the syntax of learning are intertwined (as shown in Tables 2 and 3). The conceptions formed in both groups were mostly dependent on family socialization and developed in relation to mental events (Brandt 2005) that participants had experienced (prior and during the formal learning process). The centrality of viewing the self in the context of other cultures remained of dramatic significance among multiculturals. Laing's (1990) notion of "ontological insecurity" could be applied to most cases in the multicultural group, as most of them admitted existing "in-between" cultures. Since half of the class assignments required team-effort, the significance of the group's acceptance was undeniable (see also: O'Dowd 2003). The group's acceptance is

conditioned by mutual perception. The analogy to the observer effect seems justified, since quantum theory is "intrinsically psychological" and refers to the "structure of experience" (Stapp 2011: 2). It helps unravel a wide spectrum of potentialities applicable to self-conception that evolves, as influenced by others' perception.

The liminal experience and transformation. The liminal experience enabled all participants to discard preconceptions and open their minds to uncertainty and polysemy. The re-framed state of mind emerged as non-dual, inter-connected and holistic (at the deepest level of transformation) in both groups. The differences between groups have been shown, as based on two main patterns that illustrate what is potentially attainable in a classroom and enhanced in a research-space setting. This study indicates that learning syntax patterns, openness to social interaction and advanced analytical abilities inclusive of self-reflection can be positively correlated with the depth of transformation (as shown in Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2

Outcome Space: Learning and Transformation Patterns among Monoculturals

Point of departure	Liminal Space Semantics	Learning Syntax	Transformation Pattern
Caucasian Canadian (family socialization, in congruence with father's standpoint)	Suspension of judgement, self-reflection	Independent, structured	Appreciation of intrinsic value of other cultures (moderate level, epistemological shift)
Caucasian Canadian" (revolting against separation from the "other" at home)	Suspension of judgement, affective, cognitive, holistic epiphanies.	Semi-interactive, multiple direct experiences in class. Deep self-reflection.	Deep epistemological and ontological shift: from linear, secular, dualistic frame of mind to transcultural experience, inclusive of spiritual aspect of existence. Attainment of cultural metacognition.

Source: the author's own research.

Learning and transformation patterns among monoculturals. The monocultural liminal journey stretched from an exclusive, secular and rationalistic perspective though a sensitized view of intercultural realm to a non-dual, inter-connected and holistic approach (as shown in Table 2). The structured, pre-planned learning syntax pattern was associated with a moderate level of transformation (of epistemological

nature), and congruence with parents' perspectives. On the other hand, revolting against separation from the "other" at home was found to be correlated with a se-mi-structured, interactive syntax involving multiple direct experiences in class that resulted in deep epistemological and ontological transformation. The conception of sacred space formed by a monocultural (1), as a territory that represents continuity of culture and connection with nature, constitutes a new meaning in this group. Implicitly, the participant realized that the "singular" physical space defined an indi-vidualistic, secular state of mind, not the nature of space itself. Once she understood and felt how relativist and polysemic the intercultural realm was, a sense of liberation emerged with an evolving self-conception at the epicenter of the process. The door to infinity opened: *We are a million of different things!*

Learning and transformation patterns among multiculturals. The liminal shift in this group led from a "minority" self-conception to "in-betweenness", and liberated, non-dual transcultural sense of self at the deepest level of transformation (as shown in Table 3).

Table 3

Outcome Space: Learning and Transformation Patterns among Multiculturals

Point of departure	Liminal Space – Semantics	Learning Syntax	Transformation pattern
Self-conception as "minority"	Identification of "Canadian sub-self".	Interactive, interde-pendent, collabora-tive. Self-reflection.	From ethnic to in--between self-con-ception.
Self-conception as "minority"; family socialization, with strong religious, lan-guage components.	Language closely linked to religion (sacred mental space). Epiphany regarding analytical tools (cultural script)	Interactive, interdependent, highly collaborative, Self-reflection.	From ethnic to in--between self-con-ception: *the feeling of being multicultu-ral*. Holistic view of intercultural com-munication.
Self-conception as "minority".	Self-analysis based on re-evaluation of past events. Affective and cognitive epiphanies.	Interactive. Deep self-reflection involving a personal dilemma (advanced analytical abilities).	Discarded burden of "sheath" ("me" as "minority"), liberated, non-dualistic Self. Universal/ transcultural frame of mind.

Source: the author's own research.

A troubling dilemma from the past resolved during the learning process and an exceptional analytical ability were found to be the strongest predictors of such a profound transformation. Rejection of duality (i.e., minority- majority, as based on physical appearance) is a powerful realization, as generally "the skin and the body" form "symbolic and social devices at work to differentiate oneself and relate with others" (De Luca Picione & Valsiner 2017: 536).

A cluster of common factors has been found in cases of profound ontological and epistemological shifts (in both groups): deep self-reflection, certain distance to the family-conditioned identity and curiosity regarding spirituality in other cultures. A significant meaning of the academic space per se emerged during interviews. The intersubjective learning experience possible in this multicultural environment was perceived by both mono- and multicultural participants as a unique opportunity to expand their horizons beyond their culture of origin cultivated at home[8].

Measurement of transformation depth. A diachronic perspective, the instruments offered by variation theory and the phenomenographic approach proved highly useful for this analysis. Simultaneity emerged as the most difficult yet crucial integrative aspect of the process. The application of the threshold concept enabled an analysis of the emergence of new meanings. The critical aspects of the transformative learning experience were identified as variety, in terms of approach to time, space, affectivity, the socio-cultural and natural environment across cultures. As this study confirms, intercultural learning taking place in a multicultural environment is not an automatic process (O'Dowd 2003: 118). The role of the instructor is comparable to that of a cultural mediator (Dusi, et al. 2014). Such components of ICC as self-awareness, social skills and cultural awareness were found to be crucial among learners, also forming a sine qua non condition for effective instruction, in addition to teachers' cultural background. A close connection between language and the self that emerged in this study was highlighted in the ICC literature (Grimshaw & Sears 2008: 206). Even though it seems relatively agreed upon which skills and abilities learners should develop, the question of how the transformation process develops in students' subjectivity, how the frames of meaning are reconstructed, and what level of transformation is possible to attain had not been made clear so far. This study provides a tangible example in this context, with an indication of how certain clusters of concepts can be associated with respective stages of liminal development. As based on the analysis, the cumulative effect of incorporating the critical aspects with direct experience in class resulted in a meaningful transformation among most participants. The sustainability construct has been associated with a creative potential and boundary crossing (Daskolia, Kynigos, & Makr 2015; Ogle 2007). The crucial role of the emotional aspect of learning has been explored by various authors (for

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[8] Two stages of Gennep's (1960) rites of passage paradigm have been identified in this context (separation and transition).

instance, King, Perez & Shim 2013; Bower 1981). The nature of transformation experienced by participants involved crossing symbolic boundaries and discarding components of previous self-conceptions, which is believed to be emotionally intense (De Luca Picione & Valsiner 2017: 540).

Can a multicultural background per se be treated as an indicator of collaborative skills in professional settings? The ability to switch between cultural schemas helps build tolerance of uncertainty, so much needed in the contemporary workplace. One must, however, consider idiosyncratic characteristics in each case. In terms of learning skills, all multicultural participants of this study have shown the ability to associate multiple variables simultaneously and deep understanding of socio-cultural phenomena. The auto-ethnographic narrative per se finds reflection in existing literature; students' life experiences are regarded by some authors as the starting point for teachers (Gollnick & Chinn 2009, as cited in Thompson 2013: 7).

Self-conception, othering and conflict. Othering and separation of the established and the immigrant populations in the multicultural society are perceived as triggers of conflict by some of the subjects. The correlation between intercultural communication, subjectivities and conflict seem undeniable (Broome & Collier 2012). Interdependent self-construal was positively associated with integrating behavior (Ting-Toomey 2005), which seems congruent with collaborative attitudes among most multiculturals in this study. A lack of understanding of other cultures creates barriers to learning, as class collaboration shows. The barrier between secular and religious mindsets played an important role in this context. The monocultural (1), secular sample in this study reflects a significant trend in Canadian society; one in four Canadians declared a lack of religious affiliation in 2011 (National Household Survey). Despite an open, non-assimilationist approach to immigration, Canadian society has not been free of ethnic divides (Veresiu & Giesler 2018; Banting & Kymlicka 2010). Steps to prevent the emergence of "parallel societies", as in the case of some European countries (Banting & Kymlicka 2013) seem necessary to diminish the negative consequences of "othering". As based on this study, one could hypothesize that the weaker the observer effect's impact on self-conception, the weaker the potential for conflict. Over-reliance on cognitive reasoning, at the cost of the affective aspect of communication (among monoculturals and multiculturals with life-long Canadian immersion experience) and on the materialistic paradigm (lack of schema for religiosity and spirituality) may seriously inhibit the effectiveness of intercultural communication.

The findings of this study can be used to optimize the circumstances for attainment of ICC skills and measurement of the range of conceptions as re-constructed by learners. As cognitive neuroscience confirms, "the same information results in different meanings in the consciousness of the experiencer" (Munn 2012, slide 15).

Limitations of this study. The small number of monocultural participants, especially those of secular background, might have resulted in a partial view of transformation in this sub-group. The phenomenographic approach, however, involves

a small, though diverse sample as the number of subjects is usually up to twenty, as exemplified by other studies[9]. Further research could explore the process among Euro-Canadians (or the established, monocultural population in other multicultural societies) with religious affiliations, as well as an application of these findings in professional training design, including teachers' intercultural development programs. The methodology also seems highly applicable in European societies currently experiencing an influx of immigrants.

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Appendix 1. The Procedure

Collected data consists of questionnaires, exams and in-depth interviews conducted after the courses were completed and graded. Since I taught these classes, all the data except interviews (i.e., consent forms and questionnaires) were gathered during my absence. Research Assistants would enter the classroom, distribute forms, then collect and store them in a secure, locked room, at Bissett School of Business. I had no knowledge which students volunteered to participate until the final grades were officially submitted. After providing their informed consent, participants were asked to fill out questionnaires, the content of which outlined participants' sociocultural background and the depth of their cross-cultural experience. After submission of final grades, individual interviews were scheduled and conducted by me, at the Institute for Environmental Sustainability and at Bissett School of Business, with occasional support of research assistants. All interviews were semi-structured, which characterizes phenomenographic nature of interviewing (Trigwell, 2000), with some main themes, but participants were also able to freely lead to certain concepts, experiences they considered relevant. The interviews would start with a "warm-up" activity: participants were asked to associate meanings represented by various concepts used in the course they just completed, such as: collectivism, individualism, independent and interdependent self, monochronic and polychronic time, sustainability, matrix company structure, multiculturalism, etc. In several cases, subjects participated in two or three interviews, out of their own need to continue the process of self-discovery (i.e., if their availability on the particular day was limited, but they were willing to continue). The interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed verbatim. The content of questionnaires and interviews have been coded, organized in themes and categories. All the data have been anonymized.