

# What Do Students Learn in a Cross-Cultural Negotiation? A Transformative Learning Approach

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**Abstract.** Based on 53 student assignments, this study investigates what students experienced and learnt by taking part in the cross-cultural negotiation role-play MedLee. The role-play created a *Disorienting dilemma*, an experience essential to promoting transformative learning. The goal of such learning is to challenge and extend a person's world view, which is necessary to build common ground across cultures. The three dimensions identified – *Creating common ground*, *New insight*, and *Acquisition of skills* – show that the role-play provides the students with a learning situation that involves not only practicing negotiation skills but also acquiring new insight about themselves, the potential impact of culture, and how to create common ground. Some students played out persuasion tactics and negative emotions, which are detrimental to building common ground, as expressed by the dimension *Disruptive behaviors*. The role-play initiated learning in some of the students which can be transformed into open and inclusive behaviors in future cross-cultural negotiations.

**Keywords:** transformative learning, cross-cultural negotiation, role-play, negotiation skills, open and inclusive behavior.

## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to investigate whether taking part in a cross-cultural negotiation role-play advances the students' negotiation skills and makes them more inclusive and open to others' points of view. These kinds of competencies are important because personnel operating across national borders must be capable of performing appropriate behavior and communication styles in a wide variety of cultural situations (e.g. Jameson 2007, Molinsky 2007) in order to create common ground across conflicting views and different cultures (e.g. Adair, Okumura, and Brett 2001). This implies that negotiators not only have to be prepared to deviate from their previous learnt behavior but also have to be

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comfortable to do so (Molinsky 2007). To succeed, the negotiator needs to have a mindset that helps him/her overcome cultural barriers in negotiations, acknowledge differences, and show concern for the other party's interests (Liu *et al.* 2012, Alteren and Tudoran 2019). In intercultural negotiations, different values and norms of behaviors are likely to be played out in terms of different strategies and communication styles (e.g. Mor, Morris, and Joh 2013, Zander 2005, Kim, Pan, and Park 1998, Adair, Okumura, and Brett 2001, Khakhar and Rammal 2013) causing difficulties in understanding the other party's interests and priorities (e.g. Adair, Okumura, and Brett 2001). Intercultural negotiations also pose challenges achieving results that satisfy both parties (e.g. Liu *et al.* 2012, Liu, Friedman, and Hong 2011, Adair, Okumura, and Brett 2001). The negotiator's ability to assess the specific negotiation situation carefully, and to recognize and understand the interests and priorities driving the counterparty, is essential to finalizing an agreement where both parties benefit (Liu, Friedman, and Hong 2011, Adair, Okumura, and Brett 2001). Thus, openness to new experiences and a flexible approach helps transcend challenges in cross-cultural negotiations (Alteren and Tudoran 2019), which ultimately is expected to develop into common grounds and higher joint gains (Liu *et al.* 2012, Galinsky *et al.* 2008, Ang, Koh, and Ng 2007).

Exposing students to cross-cultural settings by means of role-playing is important because they are expected to increase their understanding of how culture may influence negotiation style (e.g. Salacuse 2010, Fowler 2009, Adair and Brett 2005). They also learn how to adapt behavior as well as manage challenges that occur as a result of cultural differences (Adair 2008). Cross-cultural negotiation role-plays are intensively personal activities that involve interactions where views and assumptions are put on a test (e.g. Salacuse 2010, Mezirow 1991). This kind of learning situation is an arena expected not only to advance the students' negotiation skills, but also to make the students more open to and inclusive of others preparing them to create common ground across differences in future negotiations (Mezirow 1978, Malkki 2012, Liu *et al.* 2012, Salacuse 2010, Lewis 2005, Chen and Martin 2015).

Several studies show that role-playing facilitates reflective actions by students in higher education (Chen and Martin 2015, Stevens-Long, Schapiro, and McClintock 2012, Mazen 2011, Taylor 2007). However, research investigating the students' learning by taking part in a cross-cultural negotiation role-play is limited. Additionally, we have limited knowledge with regard to the potential of cross-cultural negotiation role-plays to promote transformative learning, that is, whether role-playing challenges the students mindset increasing their self-awareness and openness to others (e.g. Mazen 2011, Chen and Martin 2015, Bush-Gibson and Rinfret 2010).

In order to expand our knowledge regarding what students learn by taking part in a cross-cultural negotiation role-play, this study draws on the transformative learning theory and the literature on cross-cultural negotiations.

The first objective of this study is to identify concepts (themes and dimensions) representing the experiences and learning expressed by 53 students in their reflection assignments after taking part in a cross-cultural negotiation role-play. The second objective is, based on the identified concepts, to discuss the experiences and learning acquired by the same students. This study contributes to the international business education literature focusing on how to design a transformative learning situation in the classroom preparing students for international assignments, and to the cross-cultural negotiation literature concerned with training not only students but also employees in various organizations to become qualified global negotiators.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### *Transformative Learning*

Learning may imply modification of what you already know, and acquisition of knowledge that complements existing knowledge. Acquisition of knowledge does not necessarily challenge previously acquired frames of reference and habits of mind, but rather strengthens the prevailing mindset (e.g. Mezirow 1991). Facing situations where established world views are inadequate to make sense of new experiences is a feature of an increasingly globalized world. Therefore, the educators do play a key part in facilitating learning situations that challenge the students' frames of reference developed in childhood, to prepare them to deal with unfamiliar situations and unexpected problems in the real world (e.g. Sands and Tennant 2010, Mezirow 1991, Haber-Curran and Tillapaugh 2015, Stevens-Long, Schapiro, and McClintock 2012). Taken-for-granted frames of reference may imply cultural bias, and stereotyped attitudes and practices that can lead to the wrong actions in unfamiliar situations (Mezirow 2003).

Transformative learning depends on whether an individual takes a non-reflective and passive approach (mindless approach) or a reflective and engaging approach (mindful approach) to new experience (Mezirow 1991). A mindless approach is based on habits and routines as guidance for action. When new experiences are too strange and unfamiliar to the way one thinks, one may block them out or resort to some kind of defense mechanism to achieve an interpretation that is compatible with one's own perspective (Mezirow 1990b). This reaction can be associated with a person who ignores the complexity of the negotiation situation, and thus processes information in a shallow and automatic fashion, relying on fixed pie assumptions and stereotypic cues about the opponent (de Dreu *et al.* 2006, de Dreu, Koole, and Steinel 2000). These kinds of biases hinder the development of an in-depth understanding of the situation and a creative problem-solving process leading to a suboptimal negotiation agreement (Ten Velden, Beersma, and De Dreu 2010, de Dreu *et al.* 2006).