Improving Intercultural Skills: Developing Communicative Flexibility and Tolerance of Ambiguity in the Writing Center

Vicki R. Kennell, Ph.D.
ECWCA, Columbus, Ohio, March 2018
[Notes to accompany presentation slides]

Slide 1:
Today we’re going to take a look at intercultural skills such as communicative flexibility. In particular, we’ll consider how tutor training might be designed to foster these skills. Before I get started, I wanted to mention that both the research this talk is based on and my presence here today were funded by a research grant from Purdue’s Center for Intercultural Learning, Mentorship, Assessment, and Research, which I’ll refer to as CILMAR occasionally during the talk.

Slide 2:
Because I am still at a fairly early stage of this project, I have structured this time to be interactive. I will start by going over the research context, including both the rationale for conducting this research in the first place and the details of the project. I will then pause in my talk to give you a chance to experience first-hand some of what I’m talking about and to discuss in groups the usefulness of such experiences both for tutors’ intercultural development and for the design of tutor training programs. Once you’ve had a chance to see and think about the inventories, I’ll share some research results that demonstrate what using the inventories might look like in actual practice. We’ll conclude with an open discussion that will give us a chance to consider the implications of these results for tutor training.

When we talk about tutoring generally, we are talking about communication and, often, about empathy as well. When we talk about intercultural tutoring specifically, that communication needs to be flexible and we can add Tolerance of Ambiguity to the list of requirements. In consultations with L2 writers, tutors must possess Communication Flexibility. That is, they must be able to control their communication style in order to adapt to whatever situation or conversation they find themselves in. Tutors must also possess Empathy, which allows them to not only understand but also respond appropriately on a social and emotional level to the writers they work with. Again, we’re talking here about the ability to be adaptable in an intercultural situation. Finally, tutors must possess Tolerance of Ambiguity. Tolerance of Ambiguity involves the ability to see ambiguous situations in a favorable light, as positive rather than as unpleasant. Intercultural tutorials almost by definition tend toward ambiguity. For instance: Does a writer who smiles and nods really understand the suggestion you are making? Is complete lack of response an indication of a writer’s disengagement, an inability to understand your rate of speech or choice of vocabulary, or just simple confusion over the rhetorical aspects of the job at hand? But Tolerance of Ambiguity can be subdivided as well—
tutors high in empathy may also be high in valuing-diverse-others (a Tolerance of Ambiguity sub-scale), which makes sense, while still scoring lower on coping-with-change (another Tolerance of Ambiguity sub-scale). Mixed Tolerance of Ambiguity scores like this might indicate that tutors are unable to act successfully in a circumstance despite valuing the writer with whom they are consulting.

The research I’ll talk about today examines intercultural competence in the context of these sorts of sub-scales.

**Slide 3:**
The primary research context is Purdue’s Writing Lab. As Purdue has increased its international enrollment, the Writing Lab has seen increased traffic from L2 writers. As you can see from this chart, around 70% of Writing Lab visitors are L2 writers, but the majority of our tutors in any given year are native English speakers. While this is not necessarily a problem, it can result in tutor anxiety and writer dissatisfaction or in a mismatch between writer expectations and tutorial offerings.

For instance, our writers tend to prioritize grammar help while still needing help with the cultural aspects of writing, yet the majority of our tutors in recent years have considered themselves to be lacking in both knowledge of L2 grammatical issues and knowledge of the cultural aspects of writing. In other words, tutors tend to feel inadequately equipped to successfully tutor L2 writing.

Adding to this potentially-problematic situation, many of our L2 writers visit the Writing Lab without much experience in the communication style of writing tutorials. They may be expecting tutors to serve as teachers who correct their work for them or who simply tell them what to do. They then work with tutors who may have little experience interacting with international students in any capacity, let alone a consulting one. The writers may be left wondering why tutors are not doing their job (“teaching”), while the tutors wonder why the writers are so disengaged. In essence, tutors and writers may both be demonstrating a lack of communication flexibility and maybe a low Tolerance for Ambiguity. Today, though, we’ll just focus on the tutors.

**Slide 4:**
In their own words, tutors tell us some of the difficulties they face:
- Overcoming their own initial assumptions
- Working with writing processes that are fundamentally different in some way
- Differentiating between writing concerns and language issues
- And overcoming language barriers.

As one tutor commented—tutors can and do worry about “pretty much everything.”
Our solution to the problem has been to implement intensive multilingual training for all of our tutors. Every spring, every tutor spends 1 tutoring hour per week on professional development related to tutoring multilingual writers. In this training, tutors can learn about global or local aspects of multilingual writing, but they can also learn about intercultural communication. I use the word “can” because the program allows for a fair amount of topic choice by each individual tutor. Global aspects of multilingual writing might include information on the impact that culture has on writing or information about the cultural aspects of plagiarism. Local aspects include what you might expect: topics like grammar and proofreading. Intercultural communication topics range from personal characteristics (like attitudes and assumptions) to physical aspects of conversation itself (such as silence) to types of communication (such as asynchronous tutoring). Interestingly, I have found that these intercultural communication modules tend to be modules that tutors gravitate toward when given a choice.

If you want more details about the training, other conference presentations I’ve given on the subject are available for download from the Purdue e-pubs site.

**Slide 5:**
When we ask tutors to evaluate the program, they note a wide range of ways that the training has helped them. I’ve put a few quotes up for you—awareness of assumptions, understanding of common issues & the cultural nature of assignments, and increased writer comfort with a tutor who is more familiar with L2 writing are just a few of the areas that tutors identified as having been affected by the training.

Our evaluations to date suffer from several problems. First, they are entirely self-reported. We ask tutors if they think they have improved or what they have learned. By and large, tutors affirm that the training has helped. However, we undertake no structured, objective evaluation that might verify this. Second, tutors can grow professionally or develop as tutors generally without also improving in intercultural competence; thus, even if their claims of improvement are true, they may still not have improved specifically in terms of working with second language writers. And third, the current form of evaluation has no way of determining whether tutor improvements (subjective or not) are the result of the training itself or simply the result of more on-the-job experiences with international students.

I’ll just note here that study abroad programs have found that simple experience in an intercultural setting is insufficient to help students grow in intercultural competence. This might lead us to suppose that simple on-the-job experience with second language writers will be insufficient to help tutors gain intercultural competence as well.

**Slide 6:**
The question then becomes whether intensive training can be shown to have the desired outcome.
This is the research that I proposed for the CILMAR mini-grant program. I designed this study to answer three questions:

1. Does our intensive training provide intercultural competence specifically or just improve tutoring generally?
2. How much tutor improvement is due to experience over time versus the intensive training program?
3. Is the training better provided concurrent with the initial tutoring semester or subsequent to it (i.e., is it better to allow tutors to gain some experience prior to the training)?

**Slide 7:**

In order to begin to answer these questions, I structured the study to look at intercultural competence in two ways: as a point along a developmental continuum and as a combination of the sub-skills of Empathy, Communication Flexibility, and Tolerance of Ambiguity. I chose the particular sub-skills through a conversation with the experts at CILMAR. Keep in mind that this is a pilot study in the sense that I was seeking to determine whether any of these inventories would be useful for evaluating the training program long-term or for determining tutors’ needs for support.

The tutors who participated in this study were a mix of graduate and undergraduate tutors who were in their first year of tutoring in the Writing Lab. This allowed me some chance of distinguishing between changes caused by experience and changes caused by training. In a further attempt to distinguish between experience and training, I decided to enroll a control group in the study. The control group was composed of new tutors from another large research institution with similar percentages of L2 writers but without the formalized intensive training that we offer. As you can see from the numbers on the screen, the two writing centers had quite differing levels of participation. This was partly due to simple numbers: Purdue had a large influx of new tutors this past year compared to the control institution. In addition, though, research logistics played a role: All new tutors in the Purdue Writing Lab were required to complete the inventories (and thus to participate in the study) as part of their intensive training, while new tutors in the control group had to be asked and had to give consent to participate. As you might expect, not all of them chose to do so.

Tutors took two inventories as part of their paid working time at the very start of their tutoring year in August, mid-way through the year in January, and they will take them again at the end of the tutoring year in April. Tutors took the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), which is a proprietary scale that places people along a continuum of intercultural capability from denial to adaptation. The points on the continuum show how people deal with difference. So those in Denial miss difference; those in Polarization judge it; those in Minimization de-emphasize it; those in Acceptance deeply comprehend it; and those in Adaptation bridge across difference (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman 2003). The IDI claims to tell people where they think they are along that continuum (their perceived orientation) as well as where they really are (their developmental orientation). Access to the IDI requires paying to take the inventory.
The tutors’ second inventory was a Qualtrics survey that combined three questionnaires: a communication flexibility scale, a tolerance of ambiguity scale, and the Toronto empathy scale. Because those three scales are readily available in the academic literature, we will be focusing on those during the next part of our session today.

Slide 8:
So, let’s divide up into groups with 3-4 people per group. I’ll hand out packets that contain the 3 free inventories. As a group, pick one of them and follow the directions on the screen. If you finish before time is up, you may move on to another one. [You may find copies of the free inventories in their original format in the published articles listed on the References slide.]

Slide 9:
Before we open things up to a larger discussion, I wanted to give you some idea of what results from these inventories might look like. Note that all results I talk about will be from the group of Purdue tutors who completed inventories twice. A subset of Purdue tutors started later in the year and have only taken the inventories once. The control tutors were a much smaller group, and their scores tended to be very similar to those of the Purdue tutors. The hypothesis is that the greatest difference between the two groups will occur as a result of our intensive training, which is taking place this semester. Since I will not collect post-training-semester data until April, there is little point in comparing the two groups of tutors at this time.

This chart demonstrates change in individual tutors’ IDI scores between pre-tutoring and post-one-semester tutoring. Colors represent different places on the continuum. The single grid line that you see is the zero point, so bars above the line indicate change in a positive direction, and bars below the line indicate backward movement through the continuum. Remember that this is early in the study, so results aren’t expected to tell us much yet, but with that caveat we can see several things from this information.

First, Purdue’s incoming new tutors for the current year tended toward the monocultural end of the continuum. One tutor was in denial (orange), four were in polarization (yellow), and nine were in minimization (green). None of the incoming tutors had reached the point where they deeply comprehended difference or could bridge across it, which seems problematic for tutors in a Writing Lab with high numbers of international clients. Clearly, for this group, intercultural competence is something that will need to be addressed in some way.

Second, by looking at the change in scores from before they started tutoring to after they’d tutored for a semester, we can see that movement along the continuum was not in a uniformly positive direction. While this is a common finding, what it tells us here is that tutoring experience alone is not sufficient to develop intercultural competence. In addition, we find that positive or negative change is not consistent even within a single stage of the continuum (for instance, some tutors in polarization increased while others decreased), which highlights that tutors at different stages face different developmental tasks. Thus, training that attempts to
help tutors develop intercultural competence will need to recognize the range of stages the tutors are at.

So we know that these tutors came in needing to develop intercultural competence, and we know that tutoring experiences alone were insufficient for at least some tutors. The implication for training is that we need to think beyond experience but also beyond uniform programming. Tutors appeared to respond in one of three ways to their experience: they were unaffected (middle of the chart tutor), they experienced positive growth, or they responded in ways either opposite to what was expected or in ways that were unexpected. To develop training for this group, then, it becomes necessary to think about the prototypical tutor in each group and to determine how those prototypical tutors should be addressed. What will tutors in each group need from training? In particular, for the tutors who respond in unexpected ways, it is important to identify the issues related to that unexpected response in order to adjust the training so that this group of tutors can also progress.

Slide 10:
If we look at the results of the Communication Flexibility, Tolerance of Ambiguity, and Empathy inventories, again we see that there was very little similarity of change among tutors. As in the previous graph, the single horizontal grid line is the zero point, so bars above are positive and bars below are negative. You can see here that for each of the three instruments, some tutors scored higher and some scored lower the second time they took the inventory. Two points of interest: Overall, the tutors decreased in communication flexibility (the orange bars), and overall they increased in empathy (the yellow bars). It is not too surprising that students who choose to tutor would score high in empathy, nor is it too surprising that a semester of tutoring writers who might seem needy (e.g., my professor won’t grade anything with grammar errors and I’m not a native speaker!) might increase those scores.

It is, however, somewhat surprising that a semester of tutoring experience might lead to a decrease in communication flexibility. We would hope that experience results in an increasing range of potential tutoring strategies and an increasing ability to spot circumstances in which a certain communication style is not working, rather than the reverse. One possibility is that, as tutors become more confident of themselves as tutors (more confident in their role, as it were), they solidify into certain patterns of communication that they see as intrinsic to that role. Thus, perhaps a sense that “tutors don’t proofread” prevents any flexibility in communicating with a writer who is requesting grammar help, even though that request may not actually refer to grammatical errors per se. Please note that this is currently speculation on my part. We’ve only just collected this data and have yet to really dig into it. My point here is that results in these circumstances can look as you might expect, or they might look like the opposite. Either can help you consider training and support for your tutors, but you may have to think beyond the surface of the numbers themselves. As with the IDI, it is not enough to throw tutors into tutoring large numbers of second language writers and hope for the best. Intercultural competence is not best gained in a sink-or-swim manner.
Slide 11:
Tutoring may be thought of in terms of support and of challenge (see Trainer’s 2014 web posting for a really nice graphic of these two aspects). If we think of tutoring in terms of challenge, then intercultural tutoring may often prove to be high challenge, possessing a high amount of risk and potential for failure, a large potential for ambiguity, and a need for skills that may not yet have been mastered (e.g., grammatical terminology, familiarity with different accents). Writing center senior staff get to choose whether the setting is also high support or low support. Are mistakes tolerated? Are expectations high but coupled with a cooperative atmosphere? If we graph this as Trainer does, the high challenge/high support quadrant is where we are most likely to find positive change. The other three quadrants will tend toward no change or negative change. When inventories such as I used give results that are all over the place—some improvement, some decline, nothing consistent in any one category—this likely indicates too much challenge and not enough support. For our pre-experience/post-first-semester scores, that makes some sense—with high numbers of L2 writers, the Writing Lab is a challenging place to work, and we don’t start our main support (intensive L2 training) until spring. I’m hoping that our final round of data collection will show that the training provides the needed support to provoke positive change for everyone. And, of course, even if that proves true, it may still indicate a need to begin the training in a tutor’s first semester of tutoring rather than their second.

Slide 12:
I’d like to open things up to a more general discussion now. As I said earlier, this is a pilot study for us, an attempt to figure out whether inventories like this are useful for any purpose or for evaluating our training program. So I’d like to have us discuss more generally some of these questions.