

PROPOSAL OF A MODEL OF THE PROCESS OF INDIVIDUAL LEARNING OF INTERCULTURAL SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

The international development of companies comes along with an extension of the skills of employees. Traditionally, technical, managerial and linguistic qualifications constitute the necessary capacities for the success of expatriates. At present, numerous studies show that besides the mentioned skills, social skills and more particularly intercultural ones can play a decisive role in international success. Consequently, the learning of this skill becomes a necessity whether at an individual or organizational level. The present article of theoretical impact proposes a modeling of the process of individual learning of intercultural skills. We begin with a synthesis of literature on the concepts of intercultural skill and individual learning. Our contribution consists in bringing to light three dimensions of this learning: individual, organizational and social.

Keywords: *Learning, individual learning, skill, intercultural skill, theoretical model.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Globalization, international fusions, expatriations slow down the opportunities of multicultural teamwork. So, international organizations manage not only products and services, but also are more and more brought to privilege the ruling of employees coming from diverse countries and whose harmonious collaboration has to allow guaranteeing the financial success of companies (Mayrhofer, 2005; Urban, 1993). The success of this internationalization of companies thus depends, to a large extent, on the effective cooperation of the concerned individuals and their skills (Cazal and Peretti, 1992).

This effective cooperation, according to Casnir (1999), is defined by the creation of an "interculture". This interculture is a new, conscious or unconscious, dynamic and constructed culture, emanating from actions between partners in interaction, belonging to various cultures. The actors involved in the interaction negotiate new rules and new modes of behavior that are accepted and adopted by all participants. Within the framework of this interculture, workers' attitude is different from that adopted in the national context. From the combination and the dynamics of different cultural elements, workers elaborate a new common space of communication and cooperation, the "third culture", an "intermediate world". The complementarity of the various points of view and skills can ideally end in an increase in value, as intercultural synergy for example in project management or within the framework of the refitting of a service.

Le Boterf (1994) in his part considers that the concept of intercultural skill is the key of success in the international context. By placing this concept in the whole of the social field he considers that intercultural skill can be defined as this capacity which allows at the same time to know how to analyze and understand the situations of contact between persons and between carrier groups of different cultures, and to know how to manage these situations. It is about the capacity of taking a sufficient distance with regard to the situation of cultural confrontation in which we are involved, to be able to spot and read what takes place as process there, in order to be capable of mastering these processes.

During the last years, this concept of intercultural skill has acquired more and more importance. Consequently, the learning of this skill becomes a necessity during the global contacts between companies and diverse organizations.

This research work aims at proposing a theoretical model of the process of individual learning of intercultural skills. This model reveals three types of individual, organizational and social variables that influence this process.

2. THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

2.1 Intercultural Skill

During the intercultural meetings within foreign companies, human resources management takes more importance due to the specificity of issues which we can meet at this level. We become called, besides the search for good qualifications of the selected staff, to aim and to set up a real management of the skills which takes into account adaptations necessary for the cultural differences in a context of globalization.

Before moving to the definition of the concept of intercultural skill, we are interested first of all in revealing the concept of skill. Le Boterf (2000) considers that skill results from three factors: knowing how to act, wanting to act and the being able to act. However, Perrenoud (2008) sees skill as being the capacity to act effectively in front of a set of situations which we manage to master because we have at our disposal at the same time the necessary knowledge and capacity to mobilize them at the appropriate time. From his part, (Levy-Leboyer, 1996) insists on the personal and contextualized character of skill and specifies that skills are directories of behavior that certain persons master better than others, a thing which makes them effective in a given situation. Likewise, Delange and Pierre (2006) come to clarify the confusion between skill and qualification. They anticipate that qualification means skill when we treat them as being recognition of experiences. But both concepts are totally different because qualification is acquired punctually in time, whereas skill becomes updated in a cyclic and iterative way.

In what follows, we move to the definitions of the concept of intercultural skill. By placing this skill in a social field, it corresponds in a set of analytical and strategic capacities, which widen the range of interpretations, and the actions of the individual in his interpersonal interactions with members of other cultures (Ammon G, 2005; Dinges and Baldwin 1996). Consequently, it allows individuals who have it at their disposal not only to know how to analyze and understand the situations of contact between persons and carrier groups of different cultures, but also to know how to manage these situations (Boterf, 2000). Delange and Pierre (2006) consider the fact of being competent, in context of cultural interaction; it is to be more than tolerant. Tolerance defines itself as the acceptance of difference in spite of an immediate instinct of rejection. Nevertheless, intercultural skill is the fact of accepting the other without having his expectation of gratitude depreciated or threatened.

Intercultural skill integrates three types of main attitudes. First, emotional attitudes (cultural sensibility), which touch the features of the personality and the predisposition to be interested in others. Second, specific knowledge relative to civilization, history, valuable orientations, the structure and the functioning of the economic, social and organizational systems of the cultures of partners. Third, we have the behavioral capacities which correspond to the ability of combining the cognitive and emotional skills so as to be able to manage conflict situations (Dinges and Baldwin, 1996; Mercelot, 2006; Waxin and Barmeyer, 2008).

2.1 Individual Learning

We begin with the definition of the concept of learning in the literature. To better clarify it, we try to synthesize several studies treating it.

Girodan (1998) states that learning springs from a deliberate intention. Consequently, learning is performed in a personal dynamic of the individual; the decision to learn belongs to him/her and belongs only to him/her. Likewise, Besnard and Lietard (2001) add that only a clear consciousness of the usefulness of what is learnt can give meaning to this learning.

Another current of reflection defended by Levy-Leboyer (1996) considers that experience is the main source of learning. However, Weiss (1995) considers that learning begins with experience but experience alone is not enough for learning. A more global view of this concept comes with Barmeyer (2004), who sees that the learning does not ensue from a single aspect of human functioning, such as cognition or perception, but it requires the integrated participation of all its aspects: thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and behaviors. And to investigate the diversity of the variables which intervene in the act of learning, we refer to Carré (2005) who considers that learning is a set of forms suitable for the act of learning in all its situations, whether they are formal or not, experiential or didactic, self- managed or managed, deliberate or fortuitous.

We move in what follows to define the concept of individual learning. Our presentation concentrates on the theories mobilized in the sciences of management, according to which individual learning can be defined as the process of creation and acquisition of knowledge by an entity.

Several authors (Fillol, 2009; Roulin, 2006; Tavis and Wade, 1999) consider that the current of the behaviorists appears with the publication of the founding article of Watson. This behaviorist approach postulates an objectification of reality, dreaded by facts and observable data.

Edward Lee Thorndike is the first psychologist to have studied animal learning in a systematic way. His conception joins within the framework of the plan stimulus-response (S-R). The answer of the subject to a situation which acts as stimulus depends on the strength of connection which unites the stimulus and the response considered (Roulin, 2006).

Likewise, the Russian researcher Pavlov is interested in responding conditioning that is in the conditioning of a response activated by a stimulus which precedes it. He considers that learning can happen if, besides the stimulus favoring the appearance of the wished behavior (response), we add it an intensifier (Grandmont, 1999). Skinner develops the notion of effective conditioning, rejecting the idea of an innate reflex. In fact this author inspired rapidly growing fields of application such as programmed learning and behavior therapy. Besides, he questioned the traditional consequences of man and his relations with his physical and social environment (Richelle, 1977).

One of the critics of behaviorism asserts that this current appears as a materialism that claims to reduce consciousness to a kind of neutral relay "a black box" (Merleau-Ponty, 1942). The cognitive approach thus tries to exceed this limit, in particular by conferring a capacity of action to the individual.

One of the main authors of the cognitive current, we can mention Piaget. We owe him the notion of teaching by discovery in which the students interact with their environment (Lebrun, 2007). In fact, his approach can be summarized by this idea: "intelligence is adaptation". Learning is thus the tool by which the body adapts itself (Roulin, 2006).

Although the cognitive approach insures the consideration of the individual as a weighing subject, building his/her knowledge and taking an active part in learning, Case (1985) and Jarvis (1987) consider that this approach does not integrate social interactions and postulates the individualistic character of the learning process. This proposal is criticized for being finally exceeded by the post-cognitivist approach, also called socio-constructivist.

Vygotski, one of the founding fathers of the socio-constructivist current, considers that the cognitive development is in direct relation with and based on the social development. What the individuals learn and the way they think is the direct outcome of the social, cultural and historic environment which surrounds them. (Lebrun 2007).

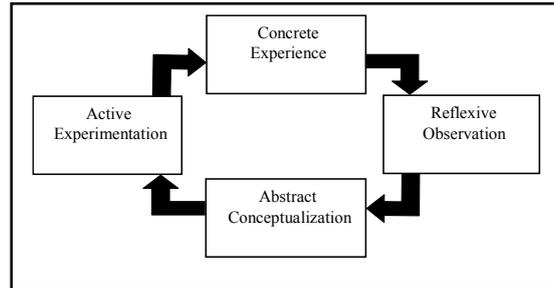
3. MODEL ELABORATION AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Several authors consider that the learning of intercultural skills is essentially an intercultural learning (Meier, 2004; Désiré, 2006; Leroy, 2001).

In a vision essentially based on interaction, learning in the intercultural context is reinforced by the permanent confrontation with other points of view (Thomas, 2000). He adds that this learning requires, besides the active methods of experiment, some means of observation, analysis and evaluation. Intercultural learning thus requires bringing together the emotional and the cognitive at the same time. This is reminiscent of the concept of individual learning by experience.

In fact Kolb (1984) considers that this learning is a continuous process which lasts for life and contributes to influence and modify thoughts and subsequent actions. In the model where he represents this learning, Kolb sees that in order to be effective the learner needs four types of skills respectively bound to concrete experience (CE), reflexive observation (RO), abstract conceptualization (AC) and active experimentation (AE).

Figure 1: Kolb's model of experiential learning



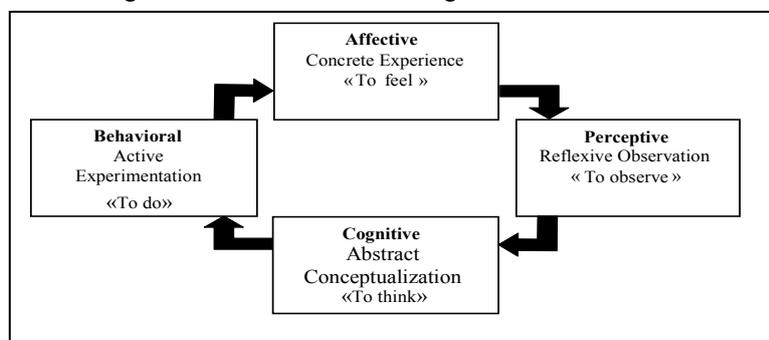
Source: David A. Kolb (1984) « Experiential learning: experience as the source of learning and development ».

He adds that the acquisition of new knowledge, skills or competences, is achieved thanks to a confrontation of these four modes of learning.

First of all, the concrete experiment that he defines by learning and feelings which constitute the fitness of an individual to be open to a different culture allowing him to improve his specific knowledge relative to the culture of the other as well as his relational skills. The second phase is called thoughtful observation which defines itself by learning and reflection and allows him to strengthen his personal skills as well as his environmental skills. The third phase is that of abstract conceptualization which is also called learning by thought. It allows the individual to establish operational skills. Finally, the phase of active experimentation, also called learning by action, which allows to build behavioral skills.

Barmeyer (2007) considers that the division of intercultural skill into three parts (emotional, cognitive and behavioral) can be juxtaposed to the theory of learning by experiment. Three of four skills can be classified under three phases of Kolb's learning by experiment, only that of The Observer is not directly classifiable under a skill. But as perception, it is always present in a latent way. The emotional skills correspond to the dimension of feeling, the cognitive skills to that of thinking and the behavioral skills to the dimension of doing, as indicated in the following figure:

Figure 2: The individual learning of the intercultural skills



Source: Barmeyer Christoph (2007) « Management interculturel et styles d'apprentissage. Etudiants et dirigeants en France, Allemagne et au Québec. »

In what follows, we elaborate in detail the hypotheses which we suggest to verify within the framework of this research.

3.1 The hypothesis relative to the nature of the variables which influence the process of individual learning of intercultural skills

The model of individual learning of the intercultural skills of Barmeyer (2007) can doubtless constitute the basis of our model of individual learning of intercultural skills. But by referring to our bibliography, we found that there are several variables which influence the quality of this process. These variables are of individual, organizational and social order. We try in what follows to synthesize some studies dealing with the nature of these variables.

The ternary explanatory model of individual learning presented by Vygotski (1985) emphasizes the interactions between the individual, the object and the social context. According to this author, the process of learning

depends at the same time on individual factors built in a social context and on social factors created by individuals. Concerning Kouabenan (2001), he emphasizes the effect of the organizational variables. He also considers that learning is made within a strong psychosocial dynamics where structuring interaction plays a role of paramount importance.

Another proposal considers that these variables are strongly bound to the nature of three components of skill. Skill or competence is always connected to an individual or to a group in a situation. It is thus produced in relation to not only characteristics of the situation but also the representation which builds the actor (Wittorski, 1997; Hillau, 1994). There is another author who deals with the concept of skills incorporated into action. He considers that these skills are tacit, not easily explicable, are incorporated with actions and are very close to the context. They are essentially mobilized in situations known for the author and are similar to routines realized without requiring any reasoning (Leplat, 1995).

The results of the previous works can reveal three types of variables that influence the process of individual learning of individual skills.

Hypothesis 1: the variables which influence the process of individual learning of intercultural skills are of individual, organizational and social order.

3.2 The hypothesis relative to the nature of the individual variables that influence the process of individual learning of intercultural skills.

Several researchers rely on the hypothesis that certain stable psychological features can help a person to form attitudes and favorable behavior in intercultural interaction. For example, Mendenhall and Oddou (1985) suggest the capacity to master stress as determining qualities in expatriation, that of developing a good personal relationship with natives, will to communicate and capacity to decode and understand the behavior of foreigners.

Among the most established five dimensions of personality (the big Five), Ward, and al. (2004) demonstrate that the emotional stability and the extroversion contributed in a positive way to the adaptation of expatriates in a host country. The results of Shaffer, and al. (2006) make also evident the positive relationship between emotional stability and openness to experiences, on the one hand, and the adaptation and the performance of work, on the other hand. Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven (2000) insist on openness, emotional stability, social initiative and flexibility as being important criteria during the selection of expatriates.

In the frame of this research work, we chose to refer to the works of Ogay, and al. (2002) to define the individual variables which influence the process of individual learning of individual skills. They consider that during intercultural meetings, contents of information are exchanged and knowledge is transmitted. Relations are also negotiated and identities are not only formed and transformed, but they are also collided and adapted to one another. Intercultural environment reunites individuals who become together more than the whole of their individualities. They add that the process of learning in this environment is favored by the following four essential variables: perception, categorization, self-respect and attributions. The advantage of the study of Ogay, and al. is that it studies the individual from two levels: The first one is based on the way it builds his representations of himself and the others and the second is interested in the role of self-respect and attributions in interpersonal relations.

- Perception: the way by which the individual selects, interprets and memorizes information of his/her environment.
- Categorization: this variable allows the individual to structure his environment by the construction of social categories.
- Self-respect: the means by which the individual operates comparisons between the various social categories which he built, comparing the groups with which he becomes identified with other groups.
- Attributions: the attributions of the individual are influenced by his social identifications. They are most of the time unconscious. Their function is to protect a social positive identity by valuing the group they belong to at the expense of other groups.

Reaching this level, we can anticipate our second research hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: the individual variables which influence the process of individual learning of the intercultural skills are perception, categorization, self-respect and attributions.

3.3 The hypothesis relative to the nature of organizational variables which influence the process of individual learning of intercultural skills

If cultural skills do not limit themselves either to the character traits or to the individual capacities, certain concrete contextual factors are however imperative in the intercultural interaction in order to determine efficiency. We have to admit that the organizational variables influence to an important extent the process of acquisition of intercultural skills.

The first element favoring the emergence of this process is intercultural training. Intercultural training aims at teaching members of a culture to interact effectively with members of another culture (Stewart Black and Stephen, 2002; Mendenhall and Oddou, 1985; Graf and Mertesacker, 2009). Studies in intercultural psychology and in sciences of management show the beneficial effect of intercultural training on the adaptation of expatriates (Black and Mendenhall, 1990; Black and al., 1991; Deshpande and Viswesvaran, 1992). Recently, Waxin and Panaccio (2005) confirm the positive effect of cultural training on three facets of intercultural adaptation of international executives (adaptation to work, adaptation to interaction and general adaptation).

On the individual plan, several authors assert that intercultural training aims at developing intercultural skills. Thus, it prepares to minimize the critical incidents and helps to benefit from various approaches of associates (Joly, 2005; Brislin and Tomoko, 1994; Waxin and Panaccio, 2005)

The second organizational element is that of the strategy of recruitment. Sekiou and Peretti (2001) define recruitment as a set of actions undertaken by the organization to attract candidates who possess the necessary skills to occupy a vacancy for the moment or in the future.

Waxin and Barmeyer (2008) encourage the presence of international employees in the organization. Their presence has for main functions: fill a need in unavailable staff in the host country, share and transfer knowledge and new skills, develop capacities and implicate executives in the organization. Bartel-Radic (2002) goes further and considers that it will be very useful to try to recruit individuals having a previous experience in the intercultural or even in the culture of the country of implantation. In fact, these individuals constitute a source of enrichment and motivation for their employees who are less experimented and less interested in learning intercultural skills.

The third factor is related the flexibility of structure. The organizational structure is the object of numerous definitions which refer successively to the division of labor (Mintzberg, 1982), in interactions between legal forms, administrative forms and associations of resources (Chandler, 1962) or in vertical and horizontal differentiation (Ouchi, 1977). Environment changes make the flexibility and the adaptability of organizational models necessary for the deployment of interactive possibilities. To adapt itself to the need and style of every user, the system, although answering a rigorous structure, has to remain open. This openness can favor the individualization of interaction and consequently the learnt materials (Depover, Giardina and Marton, 1998; Fillol, 2009). The flexibility and adaptability of structure become a reality by the reduction of this latter to small teams (Vaillancourt, 2006), by the decrease of hierarchical levels, personnel turnover, reduction of team size and openness towards other teams (Boudabous, 2005). These actions favor a bigger concordance of all the organization with its various sectors and encourage interpersonal relations and intercultural learning.

The last factor is that of corporate culture. Several researchers bind this concept to that of learning. Schein (2010) considers the organization as a group, and associates the organizational culture with a plan of paradigms shared by the group. He adds that the process of learning has to eventually be an integral part of culture. In the same order of ideas, Chanlat (1990) considers culture as a directory in which individuals, groups and the organization tow the codes of learning. He adds that culture makes of any organization a place of learning by establishing a set of relations and fixing standards which constitute a frame of identical training. Busino (1996) anticipates that learning in an organization is a particular shape of organizational transformation. This transformation concentrates on cultural change and favors learning at the individual and collective levels. Bartel-Radic (2002) touches closer our problem and considers that although the learning of skills is individual, it is directed by the culture of the company. She adds that the degree of importance granted to competent intercultural in the whole of values shared by the company constitutes a means of motivation of the employees to acquire these skills.

Arriving at this level, we can anticipate our third research hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: the organizational variables which influence the process of individual learning of intercultural skills are intercultural training, the strategy of recruitment, the flexibility of structure and the corporate culture.

3.4 The hypothesis relative to the nature of the social variable which influences the process of individual learning of the intercultural skills

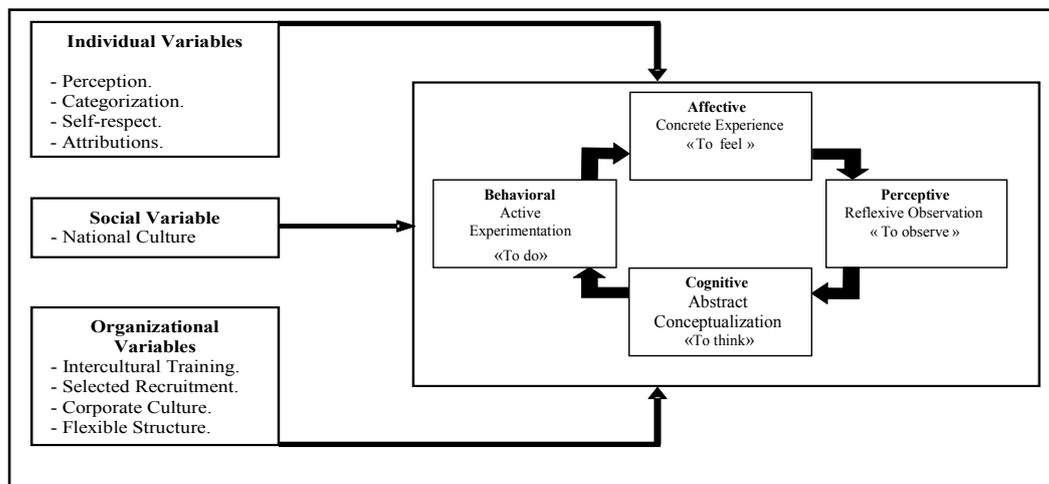
National culture or more exactly national cultural peculiarities can show itself among others in the types of style of cultural sub-systems that are economy, management, training and learning (Barmeyer, (2007). Another concept used to define these national cultural peculiarities is that of "social pact" (D'Iribarne, 1989). This author considers that working relations and the style of management in the company are influenced, according to the cultural space, by various principles and socio-historical traditions which contain an appropriate model. The cultural differences can lead to not only tensions and problems, but also synergy effects.

Among these synergy effects, Dupriez and Simon (2002), enumerate the realization of superior economic performances and intercultural learning. Parsons (1952) considers that the style of learning refers to privileged natural mode which an individual uses to acquire knowledge. In fact, this learning occurs by experience not only within the framework of training institutions but at every level the life in society. Bollinger and Hofstède (1987) confirm that even if every individual develops his own strategies to settle with his social and material environment in his family, at school or in his workplace, to succeed in overcoming his problems and overcoming challenges, the influence of national culture on the socialization remains significant. Accordingly, in the processes of learning, the individual tries, consciously or unconsciously, to answer the requirements of the company.

In the same order of ideas comes the study of Abramson, Keating and Lane (1996) who presuppose that the cognitive processes and consequently thought and learning are bound to culture. Arriving at this level, we can anticipate our last hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4: the variable of national culture influences the process of individual learning of intercultural skills. To summarize the theoretical developments previously mentioned, we propose the following figure presenting our model of research.

Figure3: The theoretical model of individual learning of intercultural skills



4. CONCLUSION

By referring to the theories mobilized in the sciences of management, we showed that individual learning can be conceived as being the process of creation and acquisition of knowledge by an individual. The literature which we provided introduced different approaches to this type of learning. Behaviorism, cognitivism and socio-constructivism are the various currents of thought which we presented. Intercultural skill defines itself by the capacity to develop the necessary skills to react to and anticipate effectively internal and external conditions. Consequently, learning this skill takes more and more importance whether it is for an individual or an organizational level. This research work is concerned with the individual level of learning of that skill. By referring to the literature, this process is strongly influenced by the individual, organizational and social dimensions of the individual in question.

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