

The Diversity Icebreaker: developing shared understanding of cooperation

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Introduction

Diversity Icebreaker (DI) builds on a model of categorising persons in three different preferences for communication and interaction. The concept of these three categories was first developed by Ekelund (1997) primarily for market communication and effective communication strategies in consultation for changing consumer behaviour. The three core preferences are labelled by assumingly neutral colours – Red, Blue and Green. The Red role preference is characterized by a relational focus, personal involvement and a social perspective; the Blue is identified by a focus on structure and task, with a logical perspective; while the Green role is recognized by a focus on change, vision and ideas.

In 1998 the first questionnaire identifying individual propensity to either preference was created. It has been revised a few times, and today the questionnaire has 42 statements that are rated in a partial-ipsative form. The Red, Blue and Green dimensions have demonstrated good internal reliability, with Cronbach Alpha levels of .82, .81, and .75 respectively (Langvik, 2006). A Likert scale organized survey conducted in 2008 yielded similar reliabilities (.80, .83, and .75), indicating that the ipsative form does not inflate the internal reliability (Langvik, 2009). Validation of the questionnaire has been done in relation to different psychological concepts reported in book by edited Ekelund & Langvik (2008).

In this article we will primarily address the unique qualities in the use of the questionnaire in seminars. A qualitative analysis of expert users' experiences (consultants) carried out by a team of researchers, ended up in identification of six categories of the impact of the DI seminars (Ekelund, Langvik & Nordgård, 2008). Participants perceive it as a tool which:

- a. is user friendly and draws upon intuitive categories;
- b. evokes positive emotions;
- c. elicits new language and creates shared understanding about managing diversity;
- d. illustrates dynamic polarisation in-between groups;
- e. creates self-, other- and team-knowledge;
- f. and organises and facilitates cooperation.

These conclusions point to effects which go far beyond self-understanding and recognising individual preferences for interaction. In order to understand the dynamics of the seminar and the effect it produces on both the individuals and organisations, we present perspectives derived from traditions outside the psychological theories. More precisely we explore theoretical perspectives from drama / theatre (spectator – actor), epistemology (paradigms – justifications), and political theory (authority – power). Here, for the first time, we spell out the application of these theoretical traditions in relation to the DI. Further, we present a social reconstruction of the seminar processes and believe that it will help evaluate and develop these seminars in the future.

Methods

We introduce the DI seminar as a process unfolding in five stages. We apply concepts from three different traditions – drama / theatre, epistemology and political theory. In drama and theatre we focus on the dividing line between stage and hall, and on the cooperation between the actor – in this case the instructor (trainer) of the DI – and the participants. There are many different dramaturgical models and we have used elements from classic Aristotelian dramaturgy, from epic dramaturgy – the way Brecht

used it, and the dramaturgy that Boal created with his Forum Theatre (Engelstad, 2004). Epistemology is about the study of knowledge and justification of beliefs (Dancy, 1985). Political theory is about ideas of how people should interact, how nations should be set up, and how interactions between nations should be regulated (McKinnon, 2008). In the context of the DI seminar, we introduce the idea of interactions between people being regulated through applying authority both through the trainer, due to his or her role as instructor, and through his or her expert knowledge about the seminar concepts.

Presentation

The first stage of the seminar is about setting the scene. Often this is done by the trainers saying:

We are gathered here to promote a better cooperation between the participants. A basic premise for good communication is that we need to understand ourselves, the other, and how the other perceives us. Then we can choose words and statements that will function well in the communication. In order to help in this self- and other- understanding psychologists have developed a questionnaire measuring different preferences for communication. We would like you to fill this out.

From a drama perspective the trainer sets the scene and the participants take part through following the instructions. In some way they are spectators, even if they are not just sitting there and listening. They are instruments for the trainer and some kind of objects to the results of the test.

From an epistemological view we apply a classical test psychological model based upon a natural scientific paradigm. The participants expect to receive new insights of themselves through the lens of objective personality tests.

From a political theoretical perspective the trainer leads the process through his or her authority implied in his / her role, and also due to expectations that he or she has expert tools that can

bring better understanding. The trainer shows authority through being the conductor / instructor, as well as through the expertise which is integrated in the questionnaire itself.

Then the candidates fill in the Diversity Icebreaker questionnaire. The participants self-administer the scoring immediately and figure out what their score is in each preference, labelled as: Red, Blue and Green. Since the preferences and colours have not been explained or defined, the results are meaningless at that point. And the participants ask questions like “What do the results like 38 Blue, 20 Red and 36 Green really mean?” The quest and motivation for self-understanding is driving the curiosity of the participants.

The second stage starts with splitting the participants in three evenly numbered groups, based upon their most dominant colour, relative to the general characteristics of the group, as they arise from the results. When the groups are set, participants are given two questions to answer: “What are the good qualities of your own colour in interaction with others?” and “What are the qualities of the two other colour groups in interactions they have with each of the other groups?” Each group lists characteristics on flip-charts and when the positive sides of their own colour are presented, some of the participants raise the issue of including the negative sides, too. This sometimes leads to a discussion of what are the good and the bad ways of representing oneself to the other. This continues as they write down the qualities of the other colour groups. Participants often feel amused and slightly embarrassed when they suggest negative characteristics for the others. The forming of a distinct in-group and out-group feeling is very typical.

From the drama perspective we can see here that the participants have shifted positions from being an object of study to being involved as actors in the seminar. From spectators in the beginning, they become actors, or as Boal would have said it “Spect-Actors”, a synthesis of spectator and actor (Engelstad, 2004).

From the epistemological perspective the group creates a meaning of each label. Our experience is that this social construction of the meaning of labels is based on at least three different types of sources, namely: the statements in the questionnaire and its paradigmatic foundation in a modernistic science oriented psychology, the participants' earlier experiences; and finally the interactive discussion within the group. It is this interactive process of the social construction of meaningful categories, the experience of its effect on perceptions, and the development of obvious prejudiced perspectives on Red, Blue and Green that makes this stage an exciting mini-replication of language development, cultural stereotypes creation, and possible cross-cultural clashes.

From the political theory perspective, the trainer is still leading the process. But, through posing questions to the groups, he or she lets the group take responsibility for providing the answers. Positive interaction and self-enhancement create energy and viability within the group. It is willing to act together with extra power – the type of power we can see in aligned and motivated groups.

When groups have finished their tasks, we move on to **the third stage** when the trainer asks each group to present its characteristics to all the other groups. The trainer also explains that this is an important part of learning about 'the other' as well as about seeing the difference between personal identity versus social identity. Participants become aware of how the concepts of Red, Blue and Green are perceived both from an insider, and an outsider perspective. They experience a feeling of cohesion within the in-group, and how easy and fun it is to be together with people who are similar. This is contrasted to the ideas they have developed of the others and their fantasies of how difficult interacting with them could be.

From the drama perspective this moment of revealing what one has written about oneself and about the others is the climax of the process. While the first stage is marked by frustration because the questionnaire results are seen as meaningless, the second stage

involves a social construction of the meaning of the categories. It becomes easily obvious that descriptions of self are positive, while descriptions of others bear quite a number of negative connotations. The participants understand that this is influenced by their own pride of themselves, as well as by their willingness to highlight an outsider perspective on the other groups. They are all put in a position where they feel that they might have acted unfair, and for this reason have become vulnerable to criticism. They have to suppress their thoughts and feelings. This is the modern way of oppressing, as Boal would articulate it. They are excited to find out how others will react to what they have in store for them. Through revealing information across the groups they develop a shared understanding that all the groups have been through the same process. This creates a kind of shared humoristic perspective of self-enhancement and prejudice. The sharing of experience, including the sense of being vulnerable and dependent on others, creates a positive feeling of trust between the participants and across the groups. Together they have worked through their own oppression and experienced a collective freedom to express their work and see that being different is acknowledged.

From the epistemological perspective we are now in the situation where views are presented from outside and inside the groups, without any claim on objective truths. There are only different ways of seeing – all equally valid. This leads to a situation where different perspectives become negotiable and interactions develop further, either in a positive, or in a negative way.

From the political theory position we see a situation where different perspectives of Red, Blue and Green are presented. We observe a political process where the meaning of categories changes through conflict, agreement, and recognition. The need for reconciliation leads to a collective reflection on learning points and how conflict could be resolved. These are the main issues which emerge in stage four.

The fourth stage is a learning process which we initiate by asking the participants to take a look from the outside. The question which triggers it is: “What has been going on and what

have you learned from the time when you started filling out the questionnaire until what you have now said and heard?”

The answers to this question are, for example:

It is nice to be working among equals. There are some significant consequences of labelling each other. Isn't it strange that it is so easy for me to act and identify myself with Blue, even though I am predominately Red really? We need all colours when we work together. It is OK to be Red if the others acknowledge this as a positive quality in our interaction.

All these comments are then acknowledged by the trainer and discussed with regard to the goals and objectives of the training session. Among the significant outcomes of this stage is a realisation that differences, surfacing through interaction with others, create an in-group vs. out group dynamic, growth of prejudices and stereotyping, polarisation, and identity challenges. On the positive side, a shared understanding emerges that we can all benefit from each other as long as individual qualities are positively acknowledged and utilised in the interaction.

From the drama perspective this stage is a 'work-through' process, or a cognitive debriefing, taking place among the participants who have ultimately become actors in the seminar. They have experienced a growing tension resulting from the movement of individuals from objects of study in the first stage (finding out personal qualities through a questionnaire) to subjects and actors who attribute meaning to the labels. Gradually the groups become polarised, reveal own work, and interact with each other, until a climax point is reached. Following such a process of polarised tension and cognitively skewed perceptions, the process of collective reflection in stage four constitutes a relief, a shared reconciliation, and a positive end to the continual surprises. The underlying question "What have you learnt?" brings value to the meanings formulated in the actors' perspectives, emphasising the right of the actors to build upon their own experience and formulate general knowledge at group level.

From the epistemological perspective this is a position where we ask the participants to look upon themselves from the outsider's perspective. This position is described in a variety of ways: by Løvlie (1983), as a reflective position where the Self is developing, by Argyris (1988), as a learning process, and by West (2000), as reflexivity in teams. Furthermore, the concepts of mindfulness and meta-cognition in the relatively new tradition of cultural intelligence suggest similar processes too (Early & Ang, 2003, Thomas & Inkson, 2009, Thomas et al, 2008). Thomas and Inkson, in their description of cultural intelligence, define meta-cognition as consisting of both seeing, monitoring and acting flexible. The fourth stage relates only to the first two components of cultural intelligence, seeing and monitoring. In order to work with the behavioural consequences of being culturally intelligent we need to go to the fifth stage.

From the political theory perspective we have moved into a reflective debate or dialog format. Discussions about how to perceive the world and, consequently, implications of how to act develop. A forum for dialogue is established. However, there are also elements of evenness in this process that make it easier for non-dominant persons, positions and perspectives to be voiced and listened to. Why is it so? First, the even number of participants in each group, representing Red, Blue and Green, makes a symbolic manifestation of an equal distribution strength. Second, the drama process where everybody has shared the same experience and laughed at their own prejudices enhances a spirit of self-reflection and humbleness. Third, a stage is reached whereby all agree that all colours are needed, as long as we have a shared positive understanding of how, when, and to what purpose each of them should contribute. These three perspectives seem to evoke an egalitarian dialogue which we often see unfolding in these seminars.

The fifth stage is focused on developing ideas about what to do tomorrow. This is a salient follow-up of the understanding of the social construction of the categories. It can be applied if a trainer has a group and a consultation task of developing a collective group into a self-managed group. For example, in a recon-

ciliation process between two conflicting parties a fifth stage like this can be nurtured by questions like:

What social constructs have in a dysfunctional way influenced our interaction? How can we build a shared platform for understanding and new social constructs that works better, brings more beauty and contributes to a better understanding of our world? What are the more functional ways of interacting? What are the plans for tomorrow?

Thus the participants are more likely to take control of how to define the world, what language to use, and how to act in the days to come.

From the drama perspective, we can see the dramaturgy in the DI as the beginning of a story where the participants / spectators are excited to figure out what the test will tell them and what the psychologist will say. It is like the touch of play in an Aristotelian way. When they have done the test they have the answer and try to analyse it. The trainer urges them to be active – the same way Brecht wanted his audience to be. Even if they did not talk in the theatre, the idea was to make them reflective. This is achieved through the participants sharing their thoughts and feelings across all the groups. This part leads to a ‘demand’ or vision for them to act differently in their real lives and jobs. There also emerges a sense of freedom from their own oppression – due to a lack of knowledge and / or lack of strategies of how to look at themselves or other people. According to the theories of drama we then leave the fiction and enact initiatives into the outer world. We have staged a process whereby participants have been open about their concerns, taken charge of their own perceptions, established shared understandings, and created a powerful collective group.

From the epistemological perspective, the action leads to new experience, which then transforms into learning and social reconstruction. Constructs become revised and new questions are put forward.

From the political point of view the participants take responsibility for formulating categories and planning action. In a way, they have taken control of the categorical system applied in their interaction, described it, shared their understandings, and thus empowered the group into self-managed actions. If we assume that the power to define the world comes from historical heritage anchored in our language and the norms by which we are brought up (Mead, 1934), that the organizational power of dominant leaders and organizational units sets the norms for ways of thinking and acting (Alvesson, 1996), and that some of the constituent parts in the DI seminar have in a negative way dominated the interaction, the opportunity then lies there for leaving this behind and moving on with shared mental models.

Discussion

The drama perspective has punctuated the DI seminar into five different stages. Each of these has different systemic components, but the sequencing is important. The participants change positions from being objects of study to becoming actors in the drama and fiction, but potentially also ending up as actors within a group of people in the real world. Fiction is left behind but the drama is still relevant. This is in line with what modern theatre, for example Boal, would prescribe. In our view the concepts from drama confirm the applicability of what originally starts as personal learning about personal preferences for communication. The process description of the seminar clearly shows that both cognitive and emotional components are triggered in different stages and that behavioural interaction in and between groups is tightly linked to cognition and affect. The triple components in the seminars are seen as essential contributors to promoting change and action.

From the epistemological perspective the DI seminars start with setting the scene with a classical personality and preference test, a paradigm from classical test theory, inspired by natural science objectivity. Such a concept belongs to a traditional modern idea of psychological knowledge – that you can measure

individual qualities based upon self-report with questionnaires of proven reliability and validity. When the questionnaire itself results in meaningless answers, and the participants are probed to formulate ideas themselves, the process turns into a social construction of categories for interaction. The climax comes at the point where the sharing of work across the groups is felt as a joint relief resulting from differently positioned, but shared experiences, ending in a self-reflective and collective laughter and cohesion. The laughter, and its imperative effect with emotions, cognition and behaviour, illustrates one of the reasons for stretching into the field of drama and theories of humour, namely, to understand the positive and profound effect of the seminars.

From the political point of view, the process starts with the trainer as the man / woman in power, which uses both role and expertise to map participant's preferences. However, the expert position is not fulfilled and the processes of participant involvement take over. Gradually, the trainer leads the groups to a zone of social dynamics where labelling takes a central position. Conflicts and negotiations of categorisation follow as the seminar develops a different focus, almost as if it were a post-modern discussion. Self- and collective reflection leave the differences of modernity and post-modernity behind, by focusing on the freedom to build on both traditions, when decisions are made on how to define the world and what to do. Epistemology becomes a politically discussed phenomenon for the actors involved. The drama terminology brings in power and liberation as politically important values. The drama and epistemological perspectives enable participants to take freedom in their own self-management and for what they decide to do in the future. In such settings we train people to take definition control in the tradition of emancipation from Marx and Freud, but not with capitalists or neurosis as controlling institutions, but with the power to define the world of social interaction.

Implications for training of intercultural competence

The field of diversity management and training has been dominated by a paradigm in which the most important sources of diversity are considered to be demographic characteristics, and race and gender are of primary concern (Milliken & Martins, 1996; Jackson, Joshi & Erhardt, 2003; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998). In our view, in international business contexts deep-level sources of diversity are more salient than demographic characteristics, and the goals for diversity management are efficiency and innovation, and ultimately the empowerment and autonomy of individuals and groups.

The latest development of concepts for training in the cross-cultural area is the concept of cultural intelligence (Earley & Ang, 2003; Thomas & Inkson, 2009; Triandis, 2006). Central components in these models are relational skills, tolerance for uncertainty, adaptability, empathy, perceptual acuity, meta-cognition, suspended judgment, and seeking information to understand situations with greater precision. Both Early & Ang (2003), as well as the research group on cultural intelligence led by Thomas (Thomas et al, 2008), have focused on meta-cognition. Some components in the DI seminar have a potential pedagogical effect in cross-cultural training due to similarities with ideas from the cultural learning field. We are listing some of these below.

First, the concept of culture. Culture, as well as Red, Blue, and Green, has unconscious components that constitute behaviour, identity and emotions (Schein, 1983).

Second, the idea of cultural dimensions. In cross-cultural interaction training the use of cultural dimensions is relatively common (Bird et al, 2000). Red, Blue, and Green have similar qualities in the way that they simplify the variety into a manageable amount of categories to be used across situations. The effect of categorisation, as well as the prejudices and polarisation between groups in stage three of the seminar, resonates with real cross-cultural clashes.

Third, the promotion of individual and collective reflection. The meta-cognitive component highlighted in the concept of cultural intelligence is applied systematically in the fourth stage of the DI seminar.

Fourth, the idea that everyone should be acknowledged. Marginalisation and discrimination present a global challenge in cross-cultural interaction and diversity management in general (Bell, 2007). The collective qualities of the seminar lead to a shared understanding that we all need and deserve to be acknowledged. This is also a philosophical normative position important to take in our globalising world (Honneth, 1995). It sets the standard for action planning in stage five of the seminar.

Fifth, the humoristic and positively loaded, affective experience. In our experience, the humoristic part described in stage three of the seminar, combined with a shared understanding of how diversity should be managed in stage four and five, create a safer psychological climate concerning individual misjudgements, shortcomings, prejudices, fears, and anxieties – all important components of becoming a more culturally intelligent person (Ekelund & Maznevski, 2008).

In the area of cultural intelligence training, Early & Peterson (2004) have voiced a wish for more pedagogical use of drama in order to facilitate learning. DI seminars are staged in this way. It is our view that the use of perspectives from drama, epistemology and political theory combined with a five-stage description of the DI seminar will promote a more relevant and precise formulation of goals for cross-cultural training. Such goals are important premises for further evaluation and research of the use of the Diversity Icebreaker in cross-cultural training.

Conclusion

In this paper we have presented the concept of the Diversity Icebreaker as it is used in seminars. We have chosen to present perspectives from three different theoretical traditions – drama,

epistemology, and political theory – to see how these concepts create meaning as to how the participants experience and learn from the seminar. We have also pointed at similarities with concepts of culture and some of the challenges in cross-cultural management training. We think that there is a huge potential for use of the DI seminar in this context. The ideas formulated in this paper have implications for evaluation and research on the DI seminar when used in cross-cultural training.

We think that the different epistemological perspectives enable the participants to learn together both from the modernistic view of science (stage one and two of the seminar) as well as from a post-modern view (stage three). The meta-cognitive parts (stage four) and the discussions of what to do in the future (stage five) invite the participants to take an active position on how to understand social interaction and what to do tomorrow. The freedom to decide is an interesting position to take due to the classical opposition between the modernistic and the post-modernistic view. Is it possible to call this position a post post-modern position? Is it possible that we, as practitioners in these training and development sessions, can take an ethical position, act accountable, and leave behind the dilemma between these opposing academic views? The ability to formulate such questions is a consequence of integrating these three different traditions and perspectives. Science develops when new questions are posed.

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