Exploring a Standardized Training Framework That Provides Individualized Student Experiences

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Abstract

Since modern workplaces and universities are becoming increasingly diverse, there is mounting pressure for universities to provide intercultural competency training for students. Various approaches for teaching intercultural competencies exist and are reliant on intercultural experts. Not all universities can provide intercultural experts to deliver training internally. Meanwhile, outsourcing to external trainings may not adequately address context-specific theory or practice. To address this need, the UNIT FOUR framework was developed to provide a repeatable, standardized one-day workshop teaching intercultural competencies for university students. The modular framework's combination of theory and practical components were designed to allow any qualified instructor to teach intercultural competencies and provide a regular positive educational experience while maintaining sufficient flexibility for individualized cultural experiences for students. The UNIT FOUR framework was intended to be taught virtually to accommodate modern teaching during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. This framework was implemented at one of the most internationally diverse campuses in Germany to explore instructors' and students' experiences. Students reacted positively to the UNIT FOUR framework in terms of learning new information and having an individualized cultural experience. Interculturally-trained and non-interculturally trained instructors reported varied experiences with this novel training format while students reported positive experiences with both types of instructors. This early exploration into a standardized training format hints at an effective and repeatable format to support instructors in a virtual teaching environment.

Keywords: Standardization, Standardized Training, Intercultural Training, Training Framework, International Students, Higher Education

Introduction

In the pace of today's world, it can feel overwhelming for one to keep track of the constant shifts in technological trends, societal shifts, and even daily interactions with other people. The internet's push towards digitalization has connected people around the world in ways that permeate nearly all aspects of daily life. Whereas previously it may have only been necessary to interact with others in one's immediate physical environment, today it is becoming increasingly expected to be able to interact with individuals from other parts of the world. This is akin to the idea of a global tribe (Alasuutari, 2015) where people are exceptionally more interconnected. Although people are not connected in a literal tribal sense, it is becoming more common for individuals to interact with others with varying cultural backgrounds in their personal and professional lives.

In the professional realm, enterprises and organizations are embracing the globalized digital world. Organizations, particularly multinational corporations (MNCs), are recognizing the challenges of adapting to different cultures as their target markets expand. These challenges have spurred demand for intercultural competencies and qualified professionals to be able to adapt to changes in cultural environments as a means towards effectively developing or maintaining business relationships. In Brazil for example, MNCs have developed organizational-wide strategies for management to adapt to foreign cultures. These MNCs' recognize *estrangeirismo*, or the Brazilian equivalent of an ethnorelativist perspective. *Estrangeirismo* is the focus of managerial intercultural competency training. Although various teaching styles such as the single- or double-loop learning methods have been implemented, these MNCs train their managers to identify, address, and adapt to *estrangeirismo* situations (Bartel-Radic, 2013). Similarly, international companies in Australia must adapt to differences in cultural expectations and practice with their partners in China. Uniquely, managers in the Australian companies must learn intercultural competencies as well as how to interact with *guanxi*. *Guanxi*, in this context, refer to individuals whose primarily responsibility is to maintain relationships between insider (Chinese) interests and outsider (foreign) interests (Gao et al., 2014). Although communication has never been easier between cultures through digitalization, professional interaction requires an emerging set of skills to facilitate meaningful interactions.

Companies and organizations whose primary activities or target audience are in different cultures see the need for intercultural competencies, but how can they determine the most appropriate set of skills or knowledge? A wide range of knowledge in the form of theories or frameworks can fit into the category of intercultural competencies ranging from well-known theories such as Hofstede's cultural dimensions (1984) to more niche approaches such as Chan & Erby's theory of applied intersexuality for intercultural queer couples (2018). The knowledge of the former can be thought of as information applicable to a larger societal or cultural context while the latter is more applicable to smaller communities or subgroups within the larger culture. Going beyond sources of knowledge, intercultural competencies also suggest a set of practical skills (Paras and Mitchell, 2017). These skillsets are designed to facilitate an individual's ability to identify, understand, and inform themselves of a culture through the interactions between behaviors and values (Morris et al., 2014). Such skillsets including emotional intelligence (Boyatzis et al., 1999) and cultural intelligence (Thomas et al., 2015) are a few of many approaches that have sought to empower individuals to adopt a practical ethnorelativist perspective that can facilitate interactions between cultural contexts. Rather than attempting to identify which of the numerous bodies of knowledge or skillsets is

the most effective or practical, this body of work instead focuses on the role that each of these plays. These are, namely, theoretical knowledge and practical skills.

The theory and practical skills incorporated into intercultural training can take many forms in practice. Many of the practical skills incorporated into intercultural training are done on a national level or using national level training (Ang and Massingham, 2007). These may often look at stereotypes and very crude generalizations of certain cultures. Intercultural trainings have more recently shifted towards examining individual culture, identity, and the concept of belonging. This relativistic approach can be better understood through the concept of fluidity of culture. In the context of this publication, fluidity of culture is defined as culture is something that is constantly in motion or flowing. This is analogous to a flowing body of water, such as a river or a creek. In order to understand the whole thing, one should start with smaller, individual components of the water. Much like taking a cup and extracting a sample out of a river, examining an entire culture is similar in that one must look at the small aspects of the culture in order to try to get a picture of the whole ecosystem. Teaching fluidity of culture is more specific and individualized than a national level approach. National level cultural training is less time-consuming, but also more generalized as opposed to personalized training through the fluidity of culture approach. Cultural training providers and organizations must balance cost, content, and time investment by taking into account these different possibilities to determine the optimal level of individual cultural experience.

Mahadevan specifies an intercultural training triangle that is formed between those that order the training (typically human resources), those that facilitate the training, and those that participate in the training (2021, p. 4). All of these groups perceive the intercultural process differently and have different levels of knowledge about the intercultural training process. They therefore argue there needs to be more focus on the actual training environment and how content is transferred, rather than the simplicity or complexity of the content. This is further indicated by a general lack of studies in this area (Mahadevan, 2021).

Many forms of intercultural trainings are available and organizations must balance their institutional needs with the training content. This interplay necessitates effective communication between the organization and the intercultural training provider since organizations, training providers, and the numerous culture environments are in a state of dynamic change. Organizations and their cultural environment are constantly changing and the cultural research & practice likewise changes in parallel. This relationship can be thought of as a dynamic system that is constantly seeking to achieve equilibrium. Equilibrium in this case is represented by organizations that are properly prepared by well-informed cultural training providers to operate in the various cultural environments where their staff, target audience, and primary activities take place. To this end, many organizations implement a form of quality control. The form of quality control is industry and context-specific, but the goal is to measure and evaluate the organization's performance for the purposes of improvement. These types of metrics inform standards that are a part of most, if not all industries. Industry standards represent minimum quality goals that private enterprises must meet in order to enter an economic market, but also serve as a goal for training institutions such as trade schools & universities to reach for their students. Lamri et al. uses France's *l'école* as an example of how standards should also be applied to training or education in a similar fashion to regulations for private industry (2019). The *l'école* are different levels of schools & programs within France's education system where performance informs an individual's placement in the hierarchy of schools and universities. In a similar fashion, Lamri et al. suggests that individuals must be properly educated and trained to adapt to

changes in culture in order to develop the skills necessary to be successful as a professional in the 21st century (2019). The *l'école* is a particularly apt comparison because it is an example of how a country has adopted a systematic approach towards education and training. Could a systematic or standardized approach also be applied towards intercultural training?

At a glance, it may seem that a standardized training approach is diametrically opposed to intercultural training. Intercultural training, by its very nature, is the means by which individuals can competently navigate different cultural contexts which are constantly changing as seen in the fluidity of culture. This state of constant change seems conceptually antagonistic to the static, standardized approach towards teaching or education.

Standardization in education has been the subject of criticism. Rubin et al. (2011) argues the idea of standardized education is seen as critical, and even as a way to dull students' capabilities. Though potentially applicable in a larger sense, does this pattern hold true for smaller, individual trainings? The effectiveness of standardized intercultural training has not been methodologically explored in great detail (Mahadevan, 2021). However, the idea of condensing a broader understanding culture into a shorter workshop form for employees, students, or other participants lends itself well to a standardized training format. Especially if this training was meant to train large groups within one organization over a defined period of time.

Standardized education is advantageous for measurement and evaluation. Such a system is currently in place in Europe through the European Skills/Competences, qualifications, and Occupations (ESCO) taxonomy used to demonstrate acquisition and measure performance of standardized skills within the region (Elken, 2017). A similar system is in place for European Higher Education Institutions through the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation Systems (ECTS) which serve as a measurable means of demonstrating equivalencies across the EU for students taking university courses (Elken, 2017). The ESCO and ECTS systems are examples demonstrating that standardized training in education allows for a measurable way to transfer skills to larger groups (Idowu et.al., 2020). A standardized structure is static, but the structure itself can allow flexible activities or exercises that can be adaptive much like the cultural fluidity approach. Incorporating flexible elements would permit content to develop based on new ideas, emerging research findings, or changes in cultural trends to ensure a personalized training environment and experience. In these parts of the training, trainers have the space and time to fully engage with training participants on a personal level without major hindrance from the static training format.

From an organizational standpoint, the potential benefits of standardized training must be balance with its challenges. Fixed learning materials and content may be more cost-effective and reusable compared to personalized trainings. However, cost & time savings must be balanced with content relevance for the organization. An intercultural training that is cost-effective may seem attractive to an organization financially, but it also risks lowering the return on investment if the content fails to address the specific context, primary activities, or goals of the organization. An organization can similarly benefit from a standardized approach in the longer term since it will be easier to ensure training continuity through simple training sessions if a trainer will hand over the training to another trainer. However, standardized training may not be appropriate for all scenarios. This approach can be effective for addressing a larger volume of people over time. Personalized trainings by comparison, can be substantially more effective for small groups expecting to operate in high-level individual situations. To better determine the viability of standardized training, formats from other fields

were examined to better understand the relationship between a static, standardized training framework and individualized participant experiences.

Evidence suggests there is value in a standardized teaching approach in different teaching environments. In medicine, standardized training scenarios have been a regular part of training & education. Whitmill et al. demonstrated the effectiveness of using standardized patients and clinical scenarios through the use of peer-assisted study sessions (PASS) to improve students' confidence in developing clinical diagnostic skills (2020). These sessions aimed at improving a combination of preclinical knowledge alongside performance experience for students to engage with standardized patients. The PASS groups rotated between standardized patients, each of whom had a consistent, yet distinct presentation of clinical symptoms where medical students improve their hands-on experience in controlled, standardized scenarios. Beyond core medical training, standardization has been applied using standardized parents to teach medical fellows how to communicate extreme clinical situations to children's parents (Vaidya et al., 1999). The static framework for the medical fellows incorporated a significant degree of flexibility and personalized feedback from the standardized parents. These parents provided feedback promoting improved practices for bedside manner and more readily handling emotionally charged conversations. On a larger scale, teaching hospitals in Shanghai have adopted a standardized residency training program (SRT) that showed improved competency in medical residents regardless of their medical specialty or the hospital where they completed their residency (He et al., 2019). Despite the wide variation in clinical scenarios that medical practitioners can face and the ever-changing body of medical knowledge, a standardized approach towards training medical professionals holds merit conceptually and in practice.

Any training approach must be tailored to effectively address the individual or organization's need within an appropriate context. This research focuses on a globalized context for professionals. To be more specific, individuals may find themselves working within a team or organization where they may encounter other individuals, institutions, or environments that are different from their own cultural environment. Individuals must be able to regularly adapt to ongoing cultural change in potentially many different environments. To effectively do so, Lamri et al. argues that educational institutions such as schools and universities should deliberately invest in preparing their students to adapt to these dynamic circumstances through many of the aforementioned intercultural competencies (2019). Higher education can be thought of as one of several gateways for individuals to develop knowledge and competencies that will prepare them for the workforce. Therefore, this research focuses on the higher education environment within a global context.

Higher education institutions play host to a unique environment that position themselves as an incubating environment for students before entry into the professional realm. Here, students may be exposed to individuals from new cultures, new systems of learning, and holistically different experiences than during their primary education. Combined with a newfound sense of freedom and chance to independently develop their identity, many university students experience the day-to-day realities of shifting towards a new cultural environment for the first time. At such an important transition point in students lives, universities should provide some measure of intercultural competencies for students. Intercultural training for international students' global mobility has shown there are various means of implementing training. Paras and Mitchell found that a pre-departure intercultural training seminar had improved Canadian students' intercultural competencies before a trip to

India, but an immersive course during their experience abroad had statistically significant improvement compared to the pre-trip seminar (2017).

Prior research highlights the importance of standardized training within the specific context of higher education. Yang et al. argues standardization is crucial for improving the quality of classroom teaching when paired with individualization to optimize the individual's learning experience (2017). This approach is particularly relevant as it aligns with the knowledge management (KM) approach of MNCs (Ang and Massingham, 2007). More specifically, the KM approach towards management for organizations requires a degree of knowing the national culture of knowledge management within a new culture and a critical understanding of how the organization should adapt to any differences between national and organizational KM. Although not all university students will eventually work for a MNC, it is important to align university standards and expectations with those that are implemented in industry. Furthermore, training has to adapt to the constantly changing technological landscape. This has become more important due to the necessary shifts towards technological mediums during the COVID-19 pandemic. Choi and de Vries highlight the importance of establishing standards for technology education based on trends seen in country analyses of education programs across Asia-Pacific and European regions (2010). The standardized training would, therefore, have to include some measure of technology.

These concepts formed the theoretical foundation of a standardized intercultural training workshop for university students. These are, namely: knowledge retention, individualized learning experience, and the incorporation of technology to effectively teach students. This research sought to explore the gap between the needs for intercultural competencies and determining whether a standardized training format can effectively meet these goals or not.

Body

The standardized intercultural training workshop was developed at the European Campus Rottal-Inn (ECRI) of the Deggendorf Institute of Technology (DIT) located in Germany. The overwhelming majority of the student population are international students hailing from approximately 80 different countries. The diversity of the student population coupled with global perspective integrated into the bachelor and master study programs inherently created a high demand for intercultural competencies. A single, 8-hour workshop was approved to teach students intercultural competencies.

The workshop was developed with the intention to teach university students intercultural competencies through two principal objectives: knowledge retention of intercultural theories and an individualized cultural experience. This reflects common practice in intercultural training as well as patterns of standardized training in other fields. The intercultural theories would be taught through the theoretical components of the workshops while the individualized cultural experience would be taught through student interaction.

The theoretical components of the intercultural competencies workshop were selected based on an average student's expected level of intercultural experience and to align with the university's Intercultural Competence Certificate available to all ECRI students. With such a wide variety of students coming from different parts of the world, it was assumed an average student would have little-to-no intercultural knowledge prior to the start of this workshop. Theories also needed to have real-world relevance for student life on a predominantly international campus.

The practical components of the intercultural competencies workshop were selected based largely on the expectations for students at ECRI. Students from all study programs were able to sign up for this workshop, so it was important to include activities that would not only relate to a classroom setting, but also for student interactions both on & off campus. Though not designed to simulate these scenarios, their relevance needed to translate to interpersonal communication scenarios.

The theoretical & practical components of the standardized training framework also needed to be implementable within a virtual context. Following suit with the traditional lectures and courses, the intercultural competencies training workshop was taught virtually due to COVID-19 pandemic. Zoom was chosen to implement this eLearning workshop.

To determine the ease and effectiveness of this training format, a trainer and moderator pair were selected to run each of the workshops. Trainers were charged with teaching the intercultural theories, guiding the practical elements, and leading the 8-hour workshop. Moderators worked in tandem with the trainers to provide technical support, verify the university requirements for attendance, monitor student participation, and fulfill the role of observer to validate the training format.

The final result was a standardized, modular training format named UNIT FOUR. This format consisted of four theory modules paired with four discussion modules that contained the selected intercultural competency theories as well as activities. This format is seen in Figure 1. Each theory module was paired with a discussion module so all students had the opportunity to apply knowledge from every theory. Theory modules were smaller modules (25 minutes each) taught in a more traditional lecture style with the trainer teaching students the selected intercultural competency theories. The discussion modules were longer than the theory modules (35 minutes each) and students were divided into smaller groups with a discussion prompt. The discussion prompts were self-reflective and centered on the paired theory module. The small student groups spent some time discussing amongst themselves and the trainer later guided a full discussion where students shared the outcomes of their individual group interactions. The training format was designed to be taught in two halves with four modules each (two theory and two discussion modules per half).
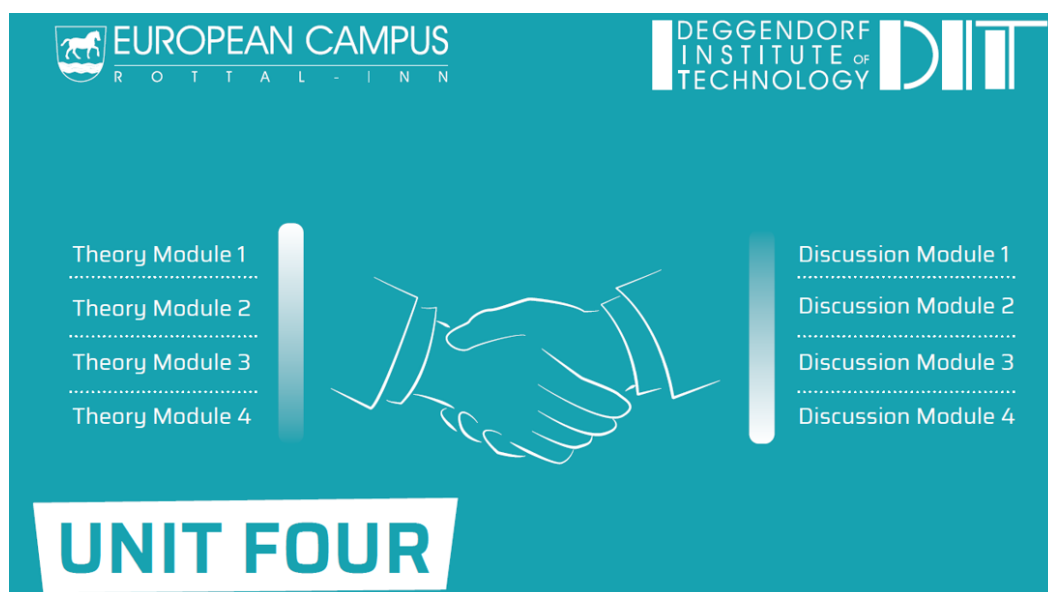

Figure 1: UNIT FOUR Framework

Due to university workshop requirements and data protection regulations, the sample for this workshop was limited. Trainers were selected personnel who were permitted to teach at this university which included administrative staff and university researchers. The moderators were undergraduate students. Both trainers and moderators were compensated for their time training and implementing the workshop. Study participants were limited to students enrolled at ECRI who voluntarily signed up for this workshop. Workshop dates were announced at the beginning of the semester and each workshop appointment was limited to 25 students. The workshop was offered several times throughout the course of two semesters.

To validate the effectiveness of the standardized training format, a mixed methods approach was selected to observe the following:

- Did students retain the theoretical knowledge learned during the workshop?
- Did students have an individualized cultural experience during the workshop?
- How effectively did workshop trainers adhere to the UNIT FOUR standardized framework?
- What were the trainers' and moderators' experience implementing this standardized workshop?

These factors were observed with four trainer/moderator pairs. The first trainer/moderator pair served as a control group since the team was made up of two of the authors. The other three trainer/moderator pairs were trained by this trainer/moderator pair. Each of the following three pairs taught the intercultural competencies workshop twice. Student experience information was collected via direct polling in Zoom during the workshops. The experience was divided into two sections to represent both halves of the workshop. The first half is shown by modules 1 – 4 representing the first two theory and discussion modules while modules 5 – 8 represent the latter two theory and discussion modules. The trainer and moderator experience information were collected via survey that included likert scales as well as open answer sections.

Students reported learning new information with all trainer/moderator pairs as seen in Figure 2. The vast majority of students reported learning new information, particularly from the modules 5 – 8 content.
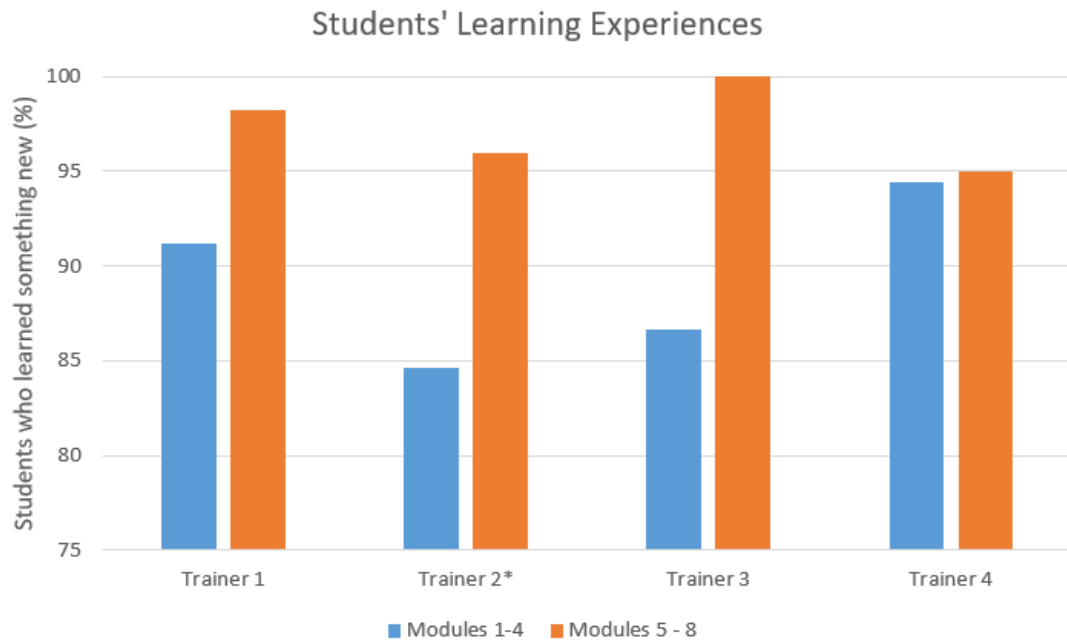
Figure 2: Students' Learning Experiences in the Intercultural Competencies Workshop.
Note: The data for Trainer 2 was incomplete due to some data failing to be recorded after teaching the first workshop.

A similar trend was observed with students' cultural experiences as seen in Figure 3. The majority of students reported a strong individualized cultural experience although it was not as prominent for Trainer 3's first set of modules.
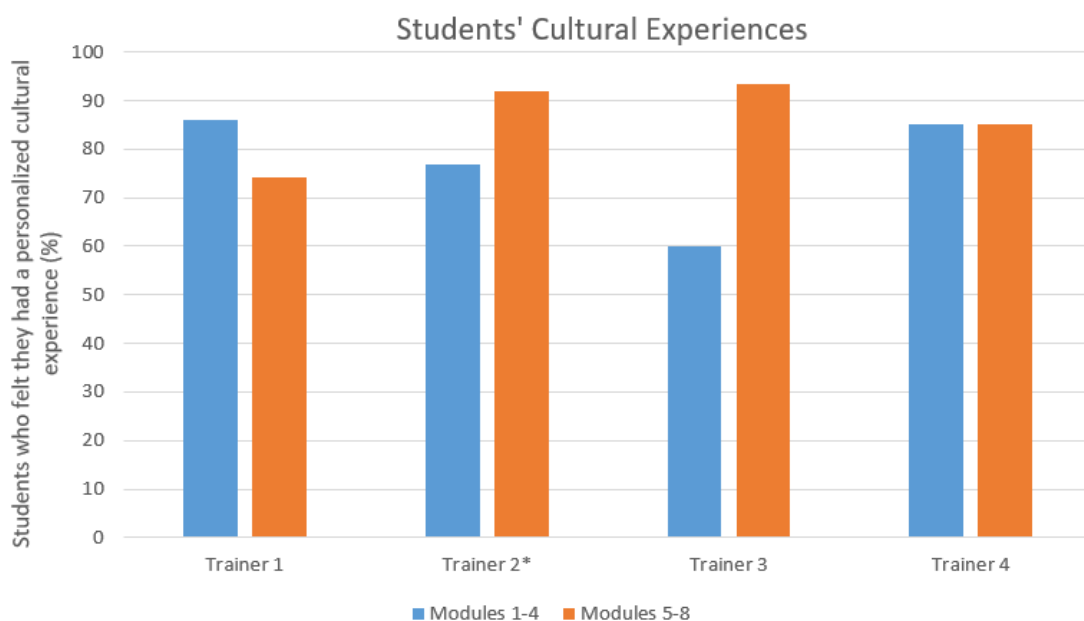

Figure 3: Students' Individualized Cultural Experiences in the Intercultural Competencies Workshop.
Note: The data for Trainer 2 was incomplete due to some data failing to be recorded after teaching the first workshop.

Adherence to the standardized training format was largely uniform in the aggregate across all trainers as seen in Figure 4. There was much more variation in the 4th theory module compared to the rest of the modules, although this is likely due to the higher degree of complexity of the content relative to the other three theory modules.
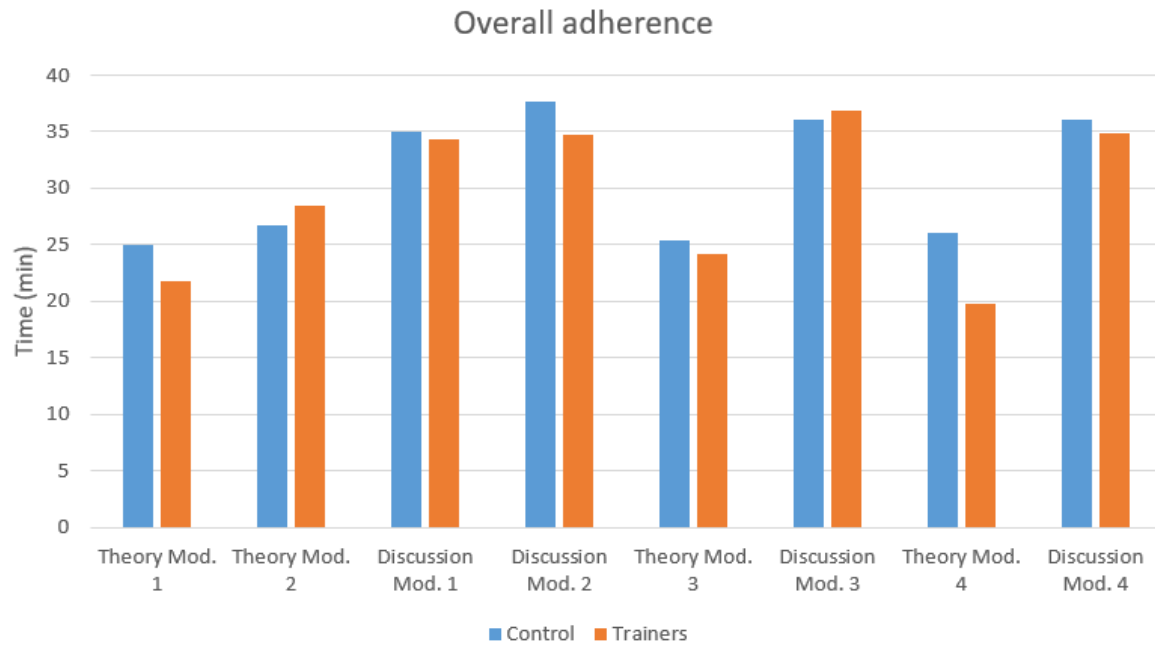

Figure 4: Aggregate Trainer Adherence to UNIT FOUR Standardized Training Modules

Upon closer examination, the adherence patterns in the theory modules stayed consistent with the aggregate pattern as indicated in Figure 5. Most theory modules were close to the planned 25 minutes with the exception of the 4th theory module. The discussion modules were quite consistent across all trainer/moderator pairs with some minor variations to the planned 35-minute modules as seen in Figure 6.
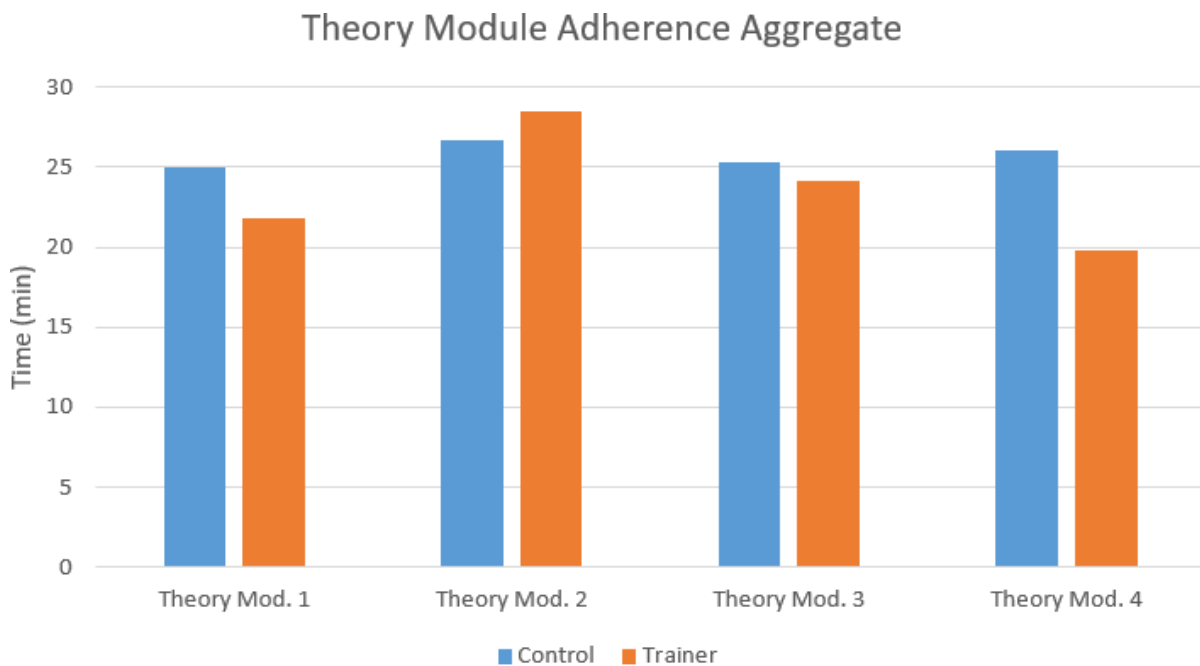

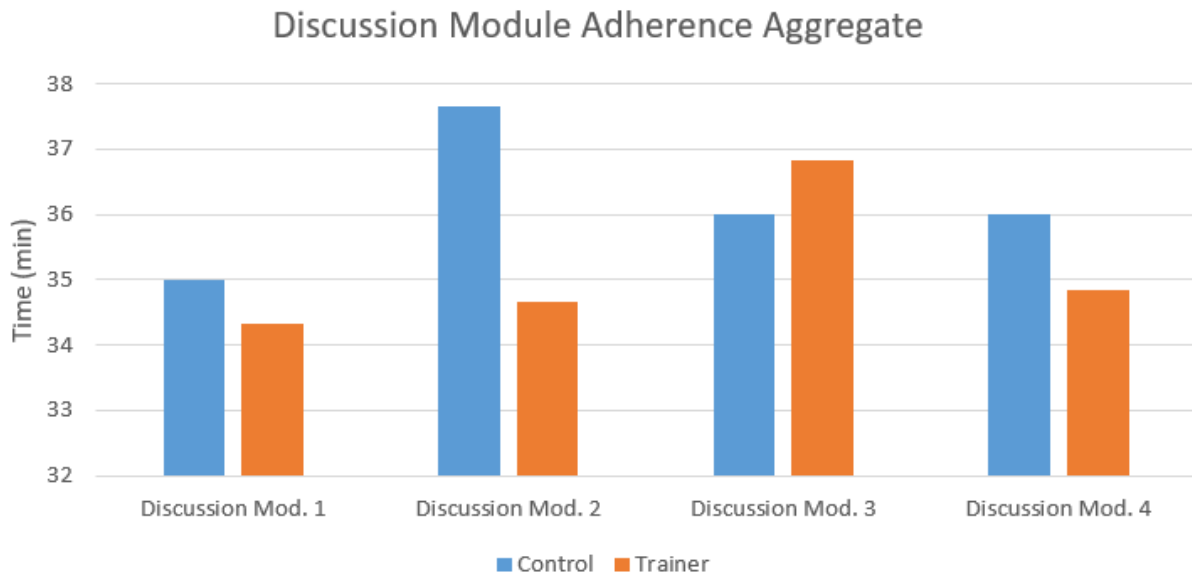Figure 5: Trainer Adherence to UNIT FOUR Theory Modules

Figure 6: Trainer Adherence to UNIT FOUR Discussion Modules

Findings about the trainer and moderator experience for the UNIT FOUR Intercultural Competencies workshop were quite positive. Trainers reported positive and optimistic expectations towards the UNIT FOUR framework. Figure 7 shows the quantitative feedback from trainers' expectations and perceptions of the framework. They found the framework to be quite useful, somewhat easy, and repeatable.
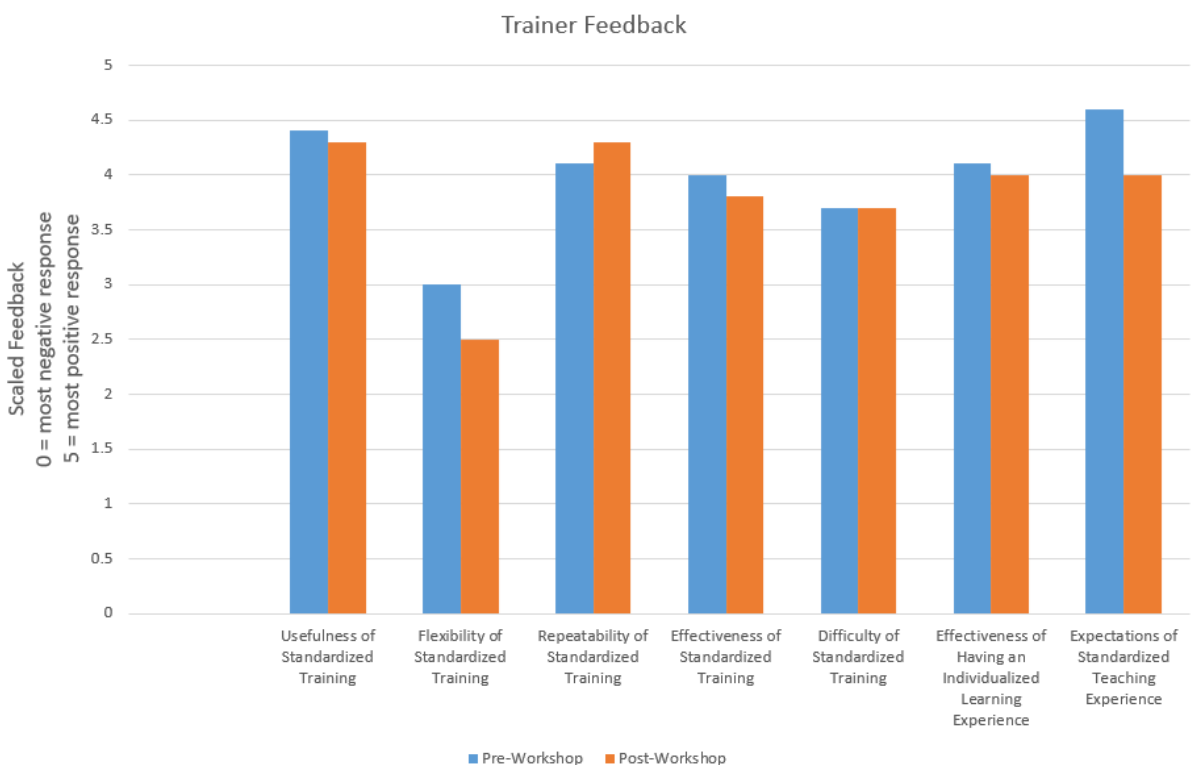

Figure 7: Trainer Feedback on UNIT FOUR Framework

Trainers' qualitative responses were analyzed using thematic analysis and aligned well with the quantitative responses. They reported feeling sufficiently prepared, felt the training format would be effective, and shared positive reflections after conducting the training. There

were mixed reactions about their expectations towards adhering to the UNIT FOUR timing with some trainers feeling confident and others marginally less confident.

Moderators' experiences were rated similarly positive to trainers, although to a lesser extent. As seen in Figure 8, moderators scored positively on all categories of workshop expectations except for the flexibility of the standardized training format. Notably, their responses did not score as positively as trainers.

The thematic analysis of the moderators' open-ended responses followed a similar trend to that of the trainers in that they felt prepared and shared positive reflects after conducting the training. Their outlook on the training as well as their expectations towards adhering to the UNIT FOUR timing was mixed across the different moderators. The latter feedback came from uncertainty towards their role's responsibilities.

When comparing the open-ended responses about the intercultural competencies workshop between trainers and moderators, another trend emerged from the thematic analysis. Trainer feedback was predominantly focused on the workshop's structure and format while moderator feedback was focused on student participants and the training content.
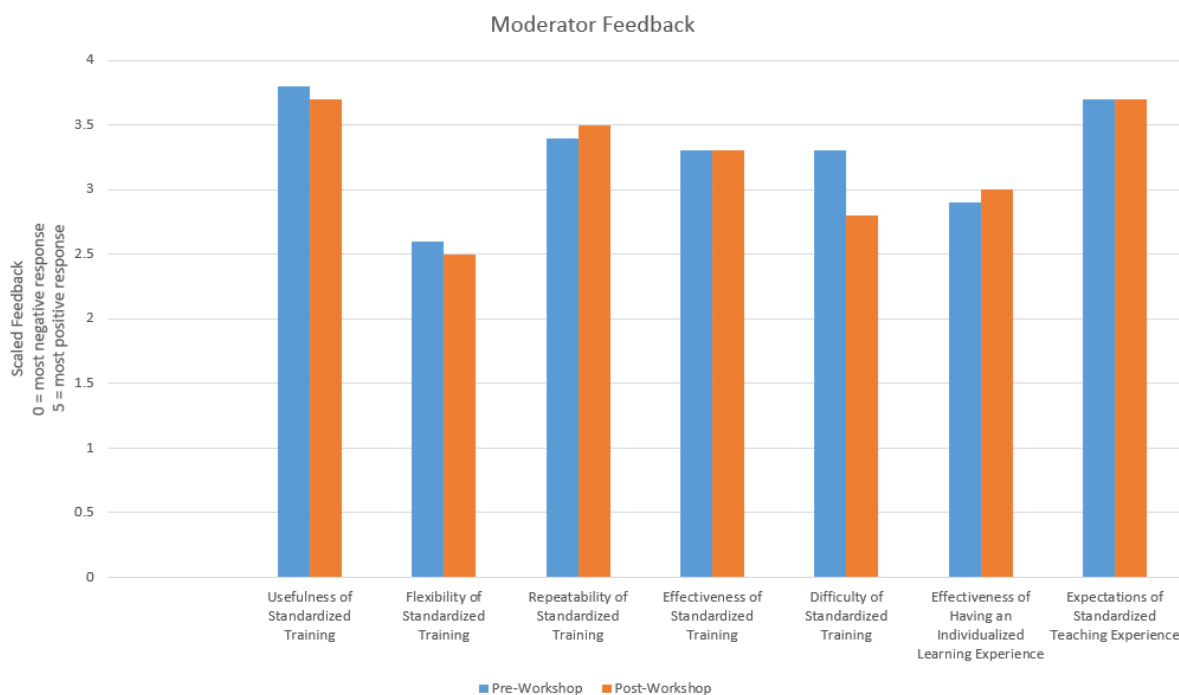

Figure 8: Moderator Feedback on UNIT FOUR Framework

The findings from the mixed methods observation suggest the UNIT FOUR standardized training format is effective for a single-day workshop teaching university students intercultural competencies. Students were able to learn new knowledge through the theory modules while simultaneously having a more personalized cultural experience through the discussion modules. The findings from these metrics is important as they are used to measure the effectiveness of intercultural trainings in industry (Gao et al., 2014) and in higher education (Paras and Mitchell, 2017). The consistency of students' experiences across different trainers suggest the UNIT FOUR format is effective without heavily relying on the knowledge or experience of the trainer. Trainers 3 & 4 did not have a professional intercultural training background or knowledge prior to this study. Their intercultural

knowledge was obtained through a singular training session and access to the publications that informed the theory module and discussion module content.

Alongside student experiences, the positive feedback from the trainers and moderators indicate the standardized training format is effective for its intended use. In the context of teaching small groups over a longer period of time, the feedback from trainers and moderators implementing the UNIT FOUR framework show both roles have an optimistic perspective. This can contribute to the ease by which this format can be implemented and potentially sustained over a long period of time which is particularly meaningful as it can help to curb the pervasiveness of burnout in higher education (Anwar et al., 2019). Additionally, the experience from students and trainers show a standardized approach is not only feasible, but also effective in applying a cultural fluidity perspective.

This promising exploration into applied standardized training is not without its shortcomings. University regulations as well as the data protection regulations at the DIT ECRI limited the ability to select trainers, participants (students), data collection opportunities, and the possible sample size of participants for each workshop. The size of this study sample in particular limits the impact of the patterns and trends observed for UNIT FOUR's implementation. Future studies can investigate whether these trends hold true with other trainers and a larger participant sample pool. The UNIT FOUR framework is theoretically capable of incorporating other content suitable for a single, 8-hour workshop, but these research findings are limited to the intercultural competencies workshop content. UNIT FOUR's modular design enables flexibility to effectively adapt different content for a singular workshop. These workshops can be customized to the target audience as the modules are interchangeable. This modular approach allows this framework to overcome many standardized training limitations. UNIT FOUR's development incorporated elements from other disciplines, but future research would be necessary to validate its viability for content aside from intercultural competencies. Similarly, these findings are also limited by the workshop's virtual delivery. Following the shift to virtual platforms due to COVID-19, the UNIT FOUR framework was designed for virtual training. Further examination is necessary to validate findings and potentially translate this format into an in-person training.

The development and validation of the UNIT FOUR framework indicates a standardized training workshop format is viable within the context of higher education. Despite challenges & criticisms to a static, standardized approach, this study shows there is value to this teaching approach. This exploratory research focused on the validity of this framework intertwined with the emerging concept of cultural fluidity. Standardized training is neither a new concept nor approach, but its implementation has received mixed reviews in the literature. UNIT FOUR is one tool that shows potential for applying a measurable and transferrable means of training individuals without sacrificing the importance of personalization in education.

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