

Intercultural Learning and Self-Formation Through Japanese Tea Ceremony: Navigating Cultural Difference in an Overseas Community of Practice

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Abstract

Contemporary intercultural learning extends beyond acquiring cultural knowledge to participation in social practices where identities and meanings are continuously negotiated. This study examines intercultural learning through the teaching and learning of Japanese tea ceremony in the New York metropolitan area, focusing on how Japanese and non-Japanese practitioners engage with cultural difference within an overseas community of practice. Drawing on eight years of ethnographic research as both instructor and practitioner, the study analyzes participant observation, cultural events, and interviews. The findings reveal four key processes: (1) Japanese participants reconstructed their understandings of Japaneseness through intercultural encounters; (2) non-Japanese participants developed strong commitment to tea practice while integrating it into their own identities; (3) cultural differences persisted even among experienced practitioners rather than disappearing through participation; and (4) legitimacy within the community was continuously negotiated through practice and relationships rather than determined solely by cultural background. Based on these findings, the study proposes the Integrative Path of Intercultural Self-Formation, a framework that conceptualizes intercultural learning as an ongoing process of navigating cultural difference through participation in a community of practice. The framework extends Communities of Practice and intercultural learning theories by positioning cultural difference not as a barrier to overcome but as a constitutive condition through which communication, identity, and meaning are continuously formed.

Keywords: intercultural learning, intercultural education, Japanese tea ceremony, communities of practice, self-formation, cultural difference, ethnographic research

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Introduction

In contemporary intercultural education, learning is increasingly understood not simply as the acquisition of cultural knowledge but as an ongoing process of participation, interaction, and meaning-making within social contexts. Particularly in learning environments that involve cultural practices, learners do not merely acquire information about another culture; they engage with new ways of communicating, interpreting experiences, and understanding themselves in relation to others. Such learning processes become especially complex in overseas contexts, where cultural practices are introduced, interpreted, and transformed among participants from diverse cultural backgrounds.

This study examines intercultural learning through the teaching and learning of Japanese tea ceremony in the New York metropolitan area. Japanese tea ceremony provides a unique context for exploring intercultural learning because it is not only a traditional cultural practice but also an embodied and relational practice involving specific forms of communication, aesthetic appreciation, social interaction, and ethical values. Learning tea ceremony requires more than mastering procedures or acquiring cultural knowledge. Through sustained participation, learners gradually develop embodied skills, become familiar with community-specific meanings, and negotiate their relationships with both the practice and the community.

Although cultural practices such as Japanese tea ceremony are often introduced overseas as forms of cultural transmission, this perspective may overlook the dynamic processes through which participants interpret and reconstruct cultural meanings. In overseas contexts, cultural practices are not simply transferred from one society to another. Rather, they become intercultural spaces where participants with different backgrounds negotiate meanings, establish relationships, and construct identities through continued engagement.

Previous research on intercultural learning has provided important insights into how individuals develop awareness of cultural difference and intercultural competence. For example, Bennett's (2017) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) conceptualizes intercultural development as a progression from ethnocentric orientations toward ethnorelative perspectives. This framework has significantly contributed to understanding changes in how individuals perceive cultural difference.

However, developmental approaches that focus primarily on changes in intercultural sensitivity may not fully capture how intercultural learning unfolds through participation in shared practices. In many intercultural learning contexts, cultural differences do not simply disappear as individuals become more experienced. Instead, differences may remain visible and continue to shape communication, relationships, and identity development. Therefore, understanding intercultural learning requires attention not only to how individuals perceive cultural difference but also to how they participate in communities where such differences are continuously negotiated.

To address this issue, this study draws on the concept of Communities of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which conceptualizes learning as participation in a shared social practice. From this perspective, learning involves becoming a member of a community through increasing participation, rather than merely receiving knowledge from more experienced individuals. The framework is particularly useful for examining Japanese tea ceremony

because learners develop practical competence, social relationships, and a sense of belonging simultaneously through ongoing engagement.

Building on this perspective, the present study proposes the concept of **self-formation** as a way to understand the identity-related dimensions of intercultural learning. In this study, self-formation refers to the ongoing process through which learners reconstruct and integrate multiple cultural perspectives through participation in an intercultural community of practice. Unlike identity formation, which often emphasizes the development of a sense of belonging or social positioning, self-formation highlights the continuous transformation of the self through intercultural encounters.

Drawing on ethnographic research conducted over eight years as both a Japanese tea ceremony instructor and practitioner, this study investigates how Japanese and non-Japanese participants experience intercultural learning within an overseas tea ceremony community. The analysis focuses on three interconnected questions:

1. How do participants engage with Japanese tea ceremony as an intercultural learning practice?
2. How do participants negotiate cultural differences that emerge through continued participation?
3. How does participation in an overseas community of practice contribute to the formation of intercultural selves?

Based on the findings, this study proposes the Integrative Path of Intercultural Self-Formation, a framework that explains how learners move through processes of attraction to cultural difference, cultural affinity, cultural dissonance, recognition of enduring cultural gaps, and the integration of multiple cultural perspectives.

The term “path” is used intentionally because the framework does not describe a fixed or linear developmental sequence. Rather, intercultural self-formation is understood as an ongoing and sometimes recursive process in which learners move among different experiences as they encounter new practices, relationships, and cultural perspectives. The framework therefore differs from models that conceptualize intercultural development as movement toward a final stage of adaptation.

This study argues that intercultural learning is not primarily a process of adapting to or overcoming cultural difference. Instead, it is a process of navigating cultural difference through sustained participation in a community of practice, where communication, identity, and meaning are continuously negotiated.

Theoretical Background

Communities of Practice and Learning Through Participation

The primary theoretical framework informing this study is the concept of Communities of Practice (CoP) developed by Lave and Wenger (1991). CoP theory challenges traditional views of learning as the transmission of knowledge from expert to novice and instead conceptualizes learning as participation in a social world. Through legitimate peripheral participation, newcomers gradually become involved in community practices and develop both practical competence and a sense of membership.

This perspective is particularly relevant to the study of Japanese tea ceremony. Tea ceremony learning does not occur only through explicit instruction. While teachers may explain procedures, meanings, and historical backgrounds, learners also acquire knowledge through observation, imitation, embodied practice, and interaction with more experienced practitioners. They learn when to move, when to speak, when to remain silent, and how to interpret subtle aspects of tea practice that are difficult to fully articulate.

Therefore, becoming a tea practitioner involves more than acquiring technical skills. It involves developing a community-specific way of seeing, communicating, and participating. In this sense, learning tea ceremony is inseparable from becoming a member of the tea ceremony community.

However, overseas communities of practice involve an additional dimension that has received less attention: the continuous negotiation of cultural difference. While CoP theory emphasizes participation, identity, and meaning negotiation, intercultural communities require participants to engage with differences in assumptions, communication styles, and interpretations of practice. This study extends the CoP perspective by examining how cultural difference itself becomes part of the learning process.

Intercultural Learning and the Need for an Integrative Perspective

Bennett's (2017) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity provides an important framework for understanding how individuals develop increasingly complex understandings of cultural difference. The model describes movement from ethnocentric orientations, including denial, polarization, and minimization, toward ethnorelative orientations of acceptance and adaptation.

The DMIS has been highly influential in intercultural education because it highlights the developmental nature of intercultural awareness. However, the present study suggests that intercultural learning in practice-based communities may involve processes that cannot be fully explained through developmental movement toward adaptation.

The findings indicate that participants often became more aware of cultural differences as they became more deeply involved in tea ceremony. Increased participation did not necessarily reduce cultural gaps; instead, it sometimes revealed previously unnoticed differences in assumptions about hierarchy, communication, ritual, and social relationships.

Therefore, this study does not position cultural difference as something that learners eventually overcome. Rather, it examines how learners continue to participate while navigating differences that may remain unresolved. By bringing together Communities of Practice and intercultural learning perspectives, this study proposes an alternative understanding of intercultural learning as a process of self-formation through participation, negotiation, and ongoing engagement with cultural difference.

Research Method

This study adopts an ethnographic approach to explore intercultural learning within an overseas Japanese tea ceremony community. The research is based on approximately eight years of continuous participation in Japanese tea ceremony in the New York metropolitan area, during which I have been involved both as a tea ceremony instructor and as a

practitioner. This dual position enabled me to examine learning processes from within the community while also maintaining an analytical perspective on interactions, practices, and meaning-making.

The primary data were collected through participant observation of everyday teaching and learning activities, public workshops, cultural events, and other tea-related gatherings. Particular attention was given to interactions between teachers and learners, the ways knowledge was communicated and acquired, and moments in which cultural assumptions became visible through practice.

In addition to participant observation, formal and informal interviews were conducted with Japanese tea ceremony learners and instructors working in overseas contexts. Interviews explored participants' motivations for learning tea ceremony, their experiences of intercultural interaction, their understandings of Japanese cultural practices, and their reflections on participation in the tea ceremony community.

The analysis focused on how participants developed practical knowledge, negotiated cultural meanings, and constructed senses of self through sustained participation. Rather than treating learning as the acquisition of cultural information, this study examined learning as an ongoing process of participation in which communication, identity, and meaning were continuously negotiated.

Findings

The analysis revealed four major findings regarding intercultural learning within the overseas tea ceremony community. Together, these findings demonstrate that participation in Japanese tea ceremony involved not only learning a cultural practice but also engaging in ongoing processes of identity negotiation, meaning-making, and relationship building across cultural boundaries.

Rediscovering and Reconstructing Japaneseness Through Tea Ceremony

The first finding concerns how Japanese participants experienced tea ceremony as a process of rediscovering and reconstructing their own cultural identities. Several Japanese participants described that their engagement with tea ceremony developed after living outside Japan, where encounters with non-Japanese learners encouraged them to reflect on cultural practices they had previously taken for granted.

For these participants, tea ceremony became a space where they reconsidered aspects of Japanese culture such as hospitality, respect, aesthetics, and interpersonal relationships. Rather than simply recovering an existing cultural identity, they engaged in an active process of reconstructing their understanding of what it meant to be Japanese.

This process illustrates that intercultural learning does not occur only among those who are learning another culture. Individuals who are positioned as cultural insiders may also experience transformation through intercultural encounters. Interaction with learners from different backgrounds provided opportunities for Japanese participants to view their own cultural practices from new perspectives.

Thus, participation in the overseas tea ceremony community created a situation in which cultural identity became something to be continuously interpreted and reconstructed rather than something fixed or predetermined.

Cultural Affinity and Deep Commitment Among Non-Japanese Learners

The second finding concerns the strong commitment developed by many non-Japanese participants. For some learners, tea ceremony initially represented an opportunity to experience Japanese culture. However, through long-term participation, tea ceremony gradually became more than an object of cultural learning. It became an important practice through which they developed a sense of belonging and personal identity.

Several Japanese instructors informally described some long-term non-Japanese practitioners as being “more Japanese than Japanese” because of their exceptional dedication to tea practice. Although this expression was used informally and humorously, it reflected recognition of the learners’ extensive commitment to studying tea ceremony, including procedures, etiquette, history, and underlying philosophies.

This finding challenges the assumption that cultural affiliation is determined primarily by nationality or cultural origin. Within the tea ceremony community, legitimacy was not based only on being Japanese or non-Japanese. Rather, commitment, participation, and accumulated practical knowledge became important sources of recognition.

At the same time, this process did not mean that non-Japanese learners simply became Japanese. Instead, they developed relationships with Japanese cultural practices while incorporating these experiences into their own existing cultural perspectives. Their learning involved the creation of new relationships between self and culture rather than simple cultural adoption.

The Persistence of Cultural Difference Through Deeper Participation

The third finding demonstrates that increased participation did not necessarily eliminate cultural differences. Instead, as learners developed deeper knowledge of tea ceremony, they often became more aware of cultural assumptions embedded within the practice.

For example, some experienced learners expressed difficulty with hierarchical communication patterns and traditional expectations regarding teacher-student relationships.

One participant explained:

One very [important thing] I find [a] negative aspect of Japanese teaching method is when the teacher talks down to the students. That is, it’s a very difficult way to get a message across, generally speaking. Hierarchy is OK. But it’s how it’s conveyed.
(Ethan)

Another participant questioned whether certain traditional forms of interaction could be maintained within an American context:

That's almost impossible to maintain in the United States. Because the whole concept of the first guest as being senior. It just doesn't make any sense. And the fact that only a first guest can speak. (Jeremy)

These comments came from experienced practitioners rather than newcomers. Their perspectives demonstrate that deeper cultural learning did not lead simply to acceptance or adaptation. Instead, greater familiarity with tea ceremony sometimes produced a more complex awareness of differences between cultural assumptions.

Importantly, these differences did not prevent continued participation. Participants continued to practice tea ceremony while maintaining critical reflections on certain aspects of the tradition. Cultural difference therefore functioned not only as a source of tension but also as an ongoing condition through which learning and meaning-making occurred.

Negotiating Authority, Legitimacy, and Membership

The fourth finding concerns the negotiation of authority and legitimacy within the overseas tea ceremony community. In intercultural learning environments, questions regarding who has the authority to teach, interpret, and represent a cultural practice become particularly significant.

Within the tea ceremony community, Japanese instructors occupied a complex position. As members of the cultural tradition, they were often expected to possess cultural authority and authenticity because of their Japanese background. At the same time, as instructors teaching overseas, they could also be positioned as outsiders to the host culture, facing linguistic and cultural challenges in their interactions with local learners. Their authority therefore could not be taken for granted but was continually negotiated in practice. Meanwhile, long-term non-Japanese practitioners also developed expertise and became respected members through sustained participation.

These findings suggest that legitimacy within the community emerged through a complex interplay of cultural background, practical competence, commitment, relationships, and participation. While Japanese identity often gave rise to expectations of cultural authority and authenticity, it did not in itself guarantee legitimacy. Rather, legitimacy was continuously negotiated as participants balanced cultural background with demonstrated competence and engagement in the shared practice.

Summary of Findings

Taken together, these findings reveal that intercultural learning in an overseas tea ceremony community involves complex processes that extend beyond cultural acquisition. Participants reconstructed their understandings of themselves, developed new relationships with cultural practices, encountered persistent differences, and negotiated membership within the community.

The findings suggest that cultural difference is not simply a barrier that learners overcome through increased knowledge. Rather, cultural difference remains present throughout the learning process and becomes part of how participants communicate, interpret practices, and form intercultural selves.

These observations provide the empirical foundation for the Integrative Path of Intercultural Self-Formation proposed in the following discussion.

Discussion: Toward an Integrative Path of Intercultural Self-Formation

The findings demonstrate that intercultural learning within an overseas Japanese tea ceremony community cannot be fully explained as a process of acquiring cultural knowledge or gradually adapting to another cultural system. While participants certainly developed increased understanding of Japanese tea ceremony through sustained participation, their learning experiences also involved uncertainty, negotiation, and continued engagement with cultural differences that were not necessarily resolved.

These findings suggest that intercultural learning is not simply a movement from unfamiliarity toward familiarity. Rather, it involves an ongoing process in which learners reconstruct their relationships with cultural practices, communities, and themselves. To conceptualize this process, this study proposes the Integrative Path of Intercultural Self-Formation.

Self-Formation as an Ongoing Process of Intercultural Learning

In this study, self-formation refers to the ongoing process through which learners reconstruct and integrate multiple cultural perspectives through participation in an intercultural community of practice.

The concept differs from identity formation in an important way. Identity formation often concerns how individuals develop a sense of belonging or position themselves within social categories. While identity remains an important aspect of participation, the present study focuses on a broader process through which learners continuously transform their ways of understanding themselves through intercultural encounters.

For participants in the overseas tea ceremony community, it was through the process of developing as a “tea practitioner” that they came to reshape their understandings of their relationships with Japanese culture, their own cultural backgrounds, and the cultural differences they encountered.

Therefore, self-formation emphasizes an ongoing and dynamic process. It does not represent the achievement of a final intercultural state but rather the continuous negotiation and integration of multiple cultural perspectives.

The Integrative Path of Intercultural Self-Formation

Based on the ethnographic findings, this study proposes six interconnected processes that characterize intercultural self-formation within an overseas community of practice:

1. Difference Attraction
2. Cultural Affinity
3. Cultural Dissonance
4. Realization of an Unbridgeable Cultural Gap
5. Navigation of an Unbridgeable Cultural Gap
6. Integration of Multiple Cultural Selves

These processes are presented analytically as a path; however, they should not be understood as a fixed or linear developmental sequence. Unlike developmental models that describe movement toward increasingly advanced intercultural orientations, the Integrative Path emphasizes an ongoing process in which participants may revisit earlier experiences as they encounter new practices, relationships, and cultural tensions.

The term “path” therefore does not suggest progression toward a final or complete intercultural identity. Instead, it refers to an ongoing process through which participants develop increasingly layered cultural selves, as the connections among different aspects of their experiences become more complex, intertwined, and deeply integrated over time.

From Difference Attraction to Cultural Affinity

The first two processes, Difference Attraction and Cultural Affinity, describe how learners initially develop relationships with tea ceremony as an unfamiliar cultural practice.

For many non-Japanese participants, cultural difference itself became a source of curiosity and motivation. The unfamiliarity of Japanese aesthetics, ritual forms, and embodied practices attracted learners and encouraged continued engagement.

Through sustained participation, this attraction developed into cultural affinity. Learners gradually developed emotional connections to tea ceremony and became increasingly involved in the community. Tea practice became incorporated into their everyday lives and personal identities.

At the same time, Japanese participants experienced a related but different process. Through interaction with non-Japanese learners, they rediscovered aspects of Japanese culture that had previously remained invisible to them. Their participation involved reconstructing rather than simply maintaining a pre-existing sense of Japaneseness.

These processes demonstrate that intercultural learning involves the transformation of relationships between self and culture. Cultural practices become meaningful through participation and interpretation rather than existing as fixed objects to be transmitted.

From Cultural Dissonance to the Recognition of Cultural Gaps

As participants became more deeply involved in tea ceremony, they encountered cultural dissonance. Increased knowledge did not necessarily eliminate uncertainty; instead, it often revealed deeper differences in assumptions about communication, hierarchy, authority, and social interaction.

This finding challenges the assumption that successful intercultural learning requires eventual resolution of cultural differences. In the tea ceremony community, experienced participants often developed a more sophisticated awareness of differences precisely because they had gained greater familiarity with the practice.

The fourth process, Realization of an Unbridgeable Cultural Gap, describes the moment when participants recognize that certain cultural assumptions cannot be completely reconciled with their own perspectives.

The concept of an “unbridgeable gap” does not imply failure, conflict, or rejection. Rather, it acknowledges that some differences remain meaningful even after extensive learning and participation. Recognizing such differences demonstrates deeper intercultural understanding because it acknowledges that some cultural differences remain meaningful even after extensive learning and participation.

Navigating an Unbridgeable Cultural Gap Through Community of Practice

The fifth process, Navigation of an Unbridgeable Cultural Gap, represents the central contribution of this study.

The findings demonstrate that participants continued to engage in tea ceremony despite recognizing cultural differences that remained unresolved. These differences were navigated through participation in the community rather than eliminated through adaptation.

This process can be understood through three interconnected dimensions of the Community of Practice framework.

First, shared practice provides a foundation for continued participation. Through repeated engagement with tea ceremony, participants develop common forms of communication, including specialized vocabulary, embodied knowledge, gestures, timing, and forms of interaction that are meaningful within the community.

Second, identity formation occurs as participants gradually develop a sense of membership. Importantly, membership is not determined only by cultural background. Instead, it emerges through sustained participation, practical competence, commitment, and relationships within the community.

Third, negotiation of meaning allows participants to interpret cultural practices collectively. For example, meanings associated with silence, hospitality, hierarchy, or ritual performance are not simply transferred from teacher to learner. They are continuously discussed, interpreted, and reconstructed through interaction.

By extending the Communities of Practice framework, this study argues that overseas communities of practice involve not only learning through participation but also the continuous navigation of cultural difference. Cultural difference is not external to the practice community; rather, it is one of the conditions through which communication, identity, and meaning are produced.

Integration of Multiple Cultural Selves

The final process, Integration of Multiple Cultural Selves, describes the ongoing development of a self that incorporates multiple cultural perspectives.

Integration does not mean that cultural differences disappear or that individuals fully merge different cultural systems into a single coherent perspective. Instead, it refers to the capacity to hold multiple ways of understanding and experiencing culture within oneself.

For participants in the tea ceremony community, integration involved maintaining engagement with Japanese tea practice while also retaining their own cultural perspectives.

They did not simply become Japanese or abandon their previous identities. Rather, they developed expanded understandings of themselves through continued participation across cultural boundaries.

This process represents the central meaning of intercultural self-formation: the development of a self that is capable of engaging with difference, negotiating ambiguity, and creating meaning through multiple cultural perspectives.

Implications for Intercultural Education

The findings offer several implications for intercultural education.

First, intercultural learning should not be understood only as the development of knowledge about other cultures or the achievement of adaptation. Learning in intercultural contexts involves ongoing participation in communities where meanings, relationships, and identities are continuously negotiated.

Second, educational environments should recognize cultural difference as a productive condition of learning rather than simply an obstacle to overcome. In language education, study abroad programs, multicultural classrooms, and community-based learning environments, encounters with difference provide opportunities for learners to reflect on their own assumptions and reconstruct their understandings of themselves and others.

Third, educators should acknowledge ambiguity and unresolved cultural differences as inherent aspects of intercultural learning. Rather than encouraging learners to eliminate uncertainty, educational approaches can support learners in developing the ability to navigate complexity through sustained engagement and dialogue.

From this perspective, intercultural education is not only about preparing individuals to function effectively across cultures. It is also about creating spaces where learners can transform themselves through meaningful participation with others.

Conclusion

This study examined intercultural learning through Japanese tea ceremony in an overseas community of practice. Drawing on eight years of ethnographic research, it demonstrated that learning involves more than acquiring cultural knowledge or technical skills. Through sustained participation, learners negotiate meanings, reconstruct identities, and form new relationships with cultural difference.

By proposing the Integrative Path of Intercultural Self-Formation, this study contributes a perspective that conceptualizes intercultural learning as an ongoing process of navigating cultural difference rather than overcoming it. The framework extends Communities of Practice theory by highlighting cultural difference as a constitutive condition of participation, identity formation, and meaning negotiation in overseas communities.

Although developed through the specific context of Japanese tea ceremony, this framework has broader implications for intercultural education and practice-based learning environments. It suggests that meaningful intercultural learning emerges not from the

disappearance of difference, but from continued engagement with difference as individuals and communities create new possibilities for understanding, participation, and self-formation.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

I used ChatGPT to assist with the following tasks for this paper: proofreading and editing, searching for helpful resources, and having interactive discussions on particular points.

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