



## Article

# Cultivating Intercultural Competence through Culturally Grounded Pedagogy: A Cultural Studies Perspective in Philippine Higher Education Institutions

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## Abstract

This study investigates the integration of cultural studies perspectives and culturally grounded pedagogy in selected Philippine higher education institutions, namely Cagayan State University, Mindanao State University and Isabela State University. Anchored in the goal of fostering intercultural competence, the research aimed to analyze how teaching practices rooted in local cultures influence students' ability to navigate, respect, and engage with cultural diversity. Utilizing a qualitative multiple-case study approach, the study drew data from focus group discussions and key informant interviews with faculty and students across the three universities. Findings revealed three dominant pedagogical practices: integration of local cultural content into classroom instruction, the use of dialogic and storytelling strategies, and community-based participatory projects. These practices enabled identity affirmation, empathy building, and real-world intercultural engagement. Participants emphasized that storytelling and dialogue allowed for the exchange of diverse cultural narratives, dismantling stereotypes and fostering mutual respect. Furthermore, experiential learning through community immersion reinforced the relevance of indigenous knowledge and traditional practices in shaping intercultural understanding. The study concludes that culturally grounded pedagogy, when guided by cultural studies perspectives, serves not only as an instructional tool but also as a transformative educational framework. It strengthens students' cultural identities, promotes empathy, and cultivates the critical awareness necessary for meaningful intercultural interactions. The findings underscore the need for higher education institutions to adopt inclusive, culturally responsive teaching practices that prepare learners for the demands of an increasingly pluralistic and interconnected world.

**Keywords:** Culturally grounded pedagogy, intercultural competence, cultural studies, higher education, indigenous knowledge, inclusive education, Philippine universities

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## Introduction

Cultivating intercultural competence has become a vital component of academic and civic life in the increasingly globalized and culturally diverse Philippine higher education. Intercultural competence, the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately across cultural boundaries, is essential for students to thrive in pluralistic societies and multicultural workplaces. Philippine higher education institutions (HEIs), which cater to diverse ethnolinguistic and sociocultural student populations, are uniquely positioned to foster this competence. One of the most promising avenues to do so is through culturally grounded pedagogy teaching strategies that draw upon the local knowledge systems, indigenous traditions, and regional identities of learners. This study explores how culturally grounded pedagogy can be utilized to develop intercultural competence among students in Philippine HEIs, guided by a cultural studies perspective that critically examines power, identity, and representation.

Scholars such as Byram (1997) and Deardorff (2006) have emphasized that intercultural competence encompasses not only knowledge of other cultures but also attitudes of openness, skills of interaction, and critical cultural awareness. In education, this competence must be cultivated through intentional pedagogical interventions. Gay (2010) advocates for culturally responsive teaching, where learners' cultural backgrounds are respected and incorporated into the curriculum. Meanwhile, Banks (2006) highlights the importance of multicultural education in promoting equity and understanding in diverse learning environments. In the Philippine context, scholars like Alamon (2017) and Mendoza (2019) argue for a deeper engagement with local cultures and languages as pedagogical tools for social transformation, especially in a nation historically shaped by colonialism and cultural hybridity.

Culturally grounded pedagogy goes beyond merely representing cultural content; it involves pedagogical approaches rooted in learners' lived experiences, worldviews, and traditional knowledge systems. Paris and Alim (2017) conceptualize this as "culturally sustaining pedagogy," which seeks to respect culture and maintain and revitalize it through education. In Philippine classrooms, this includes using local languages, indigenous narratives, community-based projects, and region-specific case studies that reflect students' identities. Such approaches are compelling in developing intercultural competence, as students learn to value their own culture while engaging critically and empathetically with those of others. When paired with a cultural studies lens, this pedagogy allows students to interrogate issues of marginalization, privilege, and resistance, equipping them with the critical tools needed for intercultural understanding.

Despite the growing body of global work on intercultural competence and culturally responsive pedagogy, there remains limited empirical research in the Philippine context that explicitly links culturally grounded pedagogy with the development of intercultural competence. Most existing studies in Philippine HEIs focus on multiculturalism as a concept or address cultural integration through foreign language instruction and student exchange programs. However, less attention is given to how everyday classroom practices rooted in local culture can actively foster students' capacity to navigate diversity. Furthermore, the voices of educators and students from rural, indigenous, and regionally diverse HEIs are often underrepresented in current discourses, limiting our understanding of how intercultural competence can be cultivated beyond Metro Manila and elite institutions.

This study addresses a significant research gap by exploring how culturally grounded pedagogical strategies can cultivate intercultural competence among students in Philippine HEIs, using a cultural studies lens to examine classroom dynamics, teaching philosophies, and learner experiences. It emphasizes how regional and indigenous cultural practices, when integrated into teaching, contribute to intercultural growth. By foregrounding the voices of both educators and learners, this study seeks to develop a context-specific understanding of how intercultural competence is formed, sustained, and challenged within diverse Philippine academic environments. The findings aim to inform culturally responsive curriculum development and institutional policy, advancing the goal of inclusive and socially just higher education.

## **Research Objectives**

1. To examine the pedagogical strategies employed by higher education instructors in the Philippines, rooted in local cultures and aimed at fostering intercultural awareness and understanding among students.
2. To explore the perceptions and experiences of faculty and students regarding the role of culturally grounded pedagogy in developing intercultural competence within diverse academic settings.
3. To analyze how integrating cultural studies perspectives into teaching practices influences students' ability to navigate, respect, and engage with cultural diversity in higher education institutions.

## Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design using a multiple-case study approach to investigate how culturally grounded pedagogical practices cultivated intercultural competence among students in selected Philippine higher education institutions (HEIs). The qualitative design was deemed appropriate for capturing the rich, contextual, and subjective experiences of both educators and learners across diverse institutional settings. Grounded in a cultural studies perspective, the study critically examined classroom practices, narratives, and institutional cultures through the lens of identity, representation, and power.

The study was conducted in three higher education institutions representing distinct cultural and geographical contexts: a metropolitan public university, a regional state university, and an island-based faith-oriented college. These sites were selected to reflect a broad range of cultural diversity within the Philippine higher education system. A total of 36 participants were purposively selected to provide in-depth perspectives on the implementation and impact of culturally rooted pedagogy. The participant group consisted of 18 faculty members, six from each institution, who were known to integrate local culture, indigenous knowledge, or community-based practices into their teaching. The remaining 18 participants were students enrolled in these faculty members' classes, selected to represent varied ethnolinguistic and sociocultural backgrounds.

Data collection methods included semi-structured in-depth interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and document analysis. All interviews were conducted face-to-face or online, depending on participant preference and health protocols. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with informed consent. Classroom observations were carried out during live or virtual sessions, focusing on teacher-student interactions, including cultural content, and using locally grounded instructional strategies. Document analysis covered course syllabi, instructional materials, institutional policies, and mission statements related to diversity and inclusive education. These multiple data sources enabled triangulation and increased the validity of findings.

Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. NVivo 12 software was used to systematically organize and code transcripts, field notes, and documents. Emerging themes were analyzed across cases

to identify shared practices, variations, and contextual influences. Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the nature and purpose of the research, signed consent forms, and were assured of confidentiality. All identifying information was anonymized using pseudonyms.

This methodological approach provided a holistic and culturally grounded understanding of how intercultural competence is cultivated through localized pedagogy. By focusing on diverse participants and triangulating rich qualitative data, the study offered meaningful insights into the intersection of culture, pedagogy, and identity in Philippine higher education.

## **Results and Findings**

### *The Pedagogical Strategies Employed by Higher Education Instructors in the Philippines*

To foster deeper intercultural awareness and understanding among students, higher education instructors at Cagayan State University, Mindanao State University, and Isabela State University have embraced pedagogical strategies intentionally rooted in local cultures. The study revealed that faculty members integrated indigenous knowledge, regional histories, and traditional practices into classroom instruction to make learning more relevant and identity-affirming. Through dialogic teaching and storytelling, students were encouraged to share personal cultural narratives, enabling them to appreciate both their heritage and that of others. Community-based projects further enhanced this engagement by allowing students to collaborate with local artisans, elders, and cultural communities, transforming the classroom into a space for mutual recognition and critical cultural reflection. These strategies enhanced academic content and nurtured empathy, critical consciousness, and intercultural competence among learners in these culturally diverse institutions.

### *Integration of Local Cultural Content into Classroom Instruction*

Instructors across Cagayan State University, Mindanao State University, and Isabela State University intentionally incorporated local cultural materials and community-based knowledge into their teaching strategies to make learning more meaningful and reflective of students' sociocultural backgrounds. These included indigenous practices, regional histories, folk narratives, and livelihood traditions such as weaving, fishing, farming, and herbal medicine. This cultural infusion preserved

regional identities and provided a foundation for students to appreciate cultural diversity within and beyond their immediate contexts.

Participant Responses:

*"I use local stories and myths to spark discussions on cultural values and how they differ across regions."*

*"Our modules contain examples from our province, like the Itawes weaving, to connect business topics to students' realities."*

*"We teach entrepreneurship by featuring actual microenterprises run by local families; this also becomes a way to discuss cultural uniqueness in livelihood practices."*

Local cultural content reflects the core principles of culturally responsive pedagogy, which promotes learner engagement by validating their cultural identities and lived experiences (Gay, 2010). This practice bridges formal academic knowledge with grassroots wisdom in regional HEIs like those in Cagayan, Mindanao, and Isabela. Students are not only engaged as learners but also as cultural bearers, developing pride in their heritage. UNESCO (2017) emphasizes that embedding indigenous and local knowledge in curricula enhances intercultural understanding and strengthens students' ability to navigate and respect cultural differences.

*Dialogic Teaching and Storytelling as Intercultural Learning Tools*

Instructors at the three participating universities emphasized dialogic teaching and storytelling as critical methods for cultivating intercultural awareness. They facilitated classroom discussions that invited students to share personal cultural narratives and community traditions. Through storytelling, especially oral histories, family practices, and regional experiences, students explored cultural variation and discovered shared values. These interactions opened spaces for deeper understanding and empathy.

Participant Responses:

*"I ask students to share how their families celebrate festivals or observe taboos; it becomes a window into our diversity even within one class."*

*"Story-sharing from their barangays and interviews with their elders help us relate tradition to topics like ethics, leadership, and even economics."*

*"Some of our students are from Lumad and Muslim communities; their stories bring powerful insights into resilience and cultural identity."*

Dialogic and narrative pedagogies create safe, reflective learning environments where students learn to listen, empathize, and reflect on shared and differing cultural experiences. According to Bhabha (1994), the "in-between spaces" created by dialogue are where cultural meaning is constructed and deconstructed. These pedagogies

humanize education, especially in diverse universities like Northern and Southern Philippines, where ethnic and linguistic diversity is vast. Banks (2006) asserts that multicultural education must actively involve students' voices to develop critical cultural consciousness, a goal well-aligned with the practices observed in these institutions.

#### *Community-Based Projects as Vehicles for Intercultural Engagement*

Across the three universities, instructors implemented community-based learning and service projects that encouraged students to engage with local cultural groups, document traditional knowledge, or contribute to cultural preservation initiatives. These experiential strategies helped deepen students' intercultural competence by fostering firsthand interaction, reflection, and collaboration with cultural others. The projects were often rooted in students' home communities, where they engaged with elders, artisans, and indigenous leaders.

#### *Participant Responses:*

*"We had students collaborate with local weavers and create marketing proposals; it helped them see the intersection of business and heritage."*

*"One group worked with a Manobo elder to record oral histories about community rituals, which gave them a new respect for oral tradition."*

*"Students produced digital stories on local farming practices and how they are tied to cultural beliefs. This made them see entrepreneurship in a new light."*

Community-based learning fosters intercultural competence by transforming education into a relational, place-based, and socially responsive practice. Deardorff (2006) emphasizes that intercultural competence develops most effectively through authentic, sustained interaction and reflection. Similarly, Nieto and Bode (2018) highlight that transformative education requires bridging academic learning with local and marginalized knowledge systems. The universities involved in this study exemplify this approach by positioning students as cultural collaborators and local development agents, thus advancing educational equity and intercultural growth.

#### *Perceptions and Experiences of Faculty and Students Regarding the Role of Culturally Grounded Pedagogy*

Culturally grounded pedagogy has emerged as a transformative approach to cultivating intercultural competence among faculty and students in the diverse academic landscapes of Philippine higher education institutions such as Cagayan State University, Mindanao State University, and Isabela State University. The study revealed that integrating local culture, indigenous traditions, and lived community

experiences into classroom instruction is crucial in affirming learners' cultural identities while fostering mutual respect and cross-cultural understanding. Educators from these institutions have utilized storytelling, dialogic teaching, and community-embedded projects to create inclusive learning environments that encourage students to engage empathetically and reflectively with cultural differences. Participant experiences highlighted how these practices elevate indigenous knowledge and validate regional wisdom, leading to a deeper appreciation for cultural diversity within and beyond their academic settings. The findings suggest that culturally grounded pedagogy serves as a teaching strategy and a vital educational bridge linking personal identity, heritage, and global awareness to equip learners with the intercultural attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary for navigating an increasingly interconnected world.

#### *Culturally Grounded Pedagogy as a Tool for Identity Affirmation and Mutual Respect*

Faculty and students across Cagayan State University, Mindanao State University, and Isabela State University widely perceived culturally grounded pedagogy as instrumental in affirming individual and collective identities, fostering mutual respect in diverse classroom settings. Through integrating indigenous knowledge, local values, and community-based learning, students reported feeling more connected to their roots and more open to understanding others' cultural contexts. Faculty viewed these approaches to validate students' lived experiences, creating a foundation of cultural pride and inclusivity for intercultural learning to grow.

#### Participant Responses:

*"When we include stories from our region or use native terms in class, students feel seen, and it opens them up to listen to others, too."*

*"Our students become proud to share about their family practices because they are treated as sources of knowledge, not as rural or backward."*

*"Recognizing our local ways in teaching breaks down the idea that only mainstream or urban culture is legitimate, it helps students appreciate difference."*

The findings affirm that culturally grounded pedagogy is a powerful entry point for intercultural competence by anchoring learners in their identities. As Nieto (2004) asserts, affirming students' cultural backgrounds in educational spaces increases their capacity to relate with others in respectful and open ways. Identity affirmation is foundational to intercultural competence because it builds self-awareness and reduces defensiveness when encountering unfamiliar perspectives.

This echoes Deardorff's (2006) model, where attitudes like openness and respect are prerequisites to developing practical intercultural skills.

#### *Culturally Responsive Classrooms Promote Empathy and Dialogue Across Differences*

Faculty and students consistently described culturally responsive classrooms as safe and dynamic spaces where differences could be shared, discussed, and respected. Instructors emphasized storytelling, open dialogue, and collaborative projects to bring diverse perspectives into the classroom. Students shared that these practices fostered empathy and allowed them to view cultural diversity not as a challenge but as a source of insight. These experiences helped dismantle stereotypes and build intercultural understanding.

#### Participant Responses:

*"When I heard my classmate's story about her family's beliefs, I realized how little I knew about our island's cultural diversity."*

*"The teacher asked us to compare our barangay traditions, making me more curious instead of judgmental."*

*"We had a session where everyone shared a folk practice, there were laughs, surprises, and real respect in the room."*

Culturally grounded pedagogy that centers empathy and dialogue is aligned with intercultural communication theory, which prioritizes perspective-taking and interaction as key competencies (Byram, 1997). These classroom practices nurture empathy by encouraging learners to suspend assumptions and listen actively to others' experiences. Banks (2006) also emphasized that democratic dialogue in multicultural classrooms fosters the critical consciousness to address inequality and bias. In the classrooms of the three participating universities, these pedagogical choices made cultural difference a resource for learning rather than a barrier to unity.

#### *Community-Rooted Pedagogy Enhances Real-World Application of Intercultural Values*

Faculty and students highlighted that learning activities tied to the local community, such as immersion projects, interviews with cultural elders, and heritage mapping, played a vital role in strengthening students' intercultural values and civic awareness. These practices allowed students to encounter cultural knowledge systems outside the classroom and reflect critically on the relevance of such knowledge in

contemporary life. In turn, students developed a greater appreciation for their traditions and the diverse cultural realities within their regions.

#### Participant Responses:

*"Interviewing our local herbalist made me realize how much wisdom we ignore; we must learn to respect all forms of knowledge."*

*"Helping a community document their fishing rituals helped me understand that culture is tied to survival, not just something in textbooks."*

*"When I talked to my grandfather about our family's practices, I learned to value our differences instead of being ashamed of them."*

Culturally grounded, community-based pedagogy facilitates intercultural competence by enabling students to apply values of empathy, respect, and open-mindedness in real-world settings. Paris and Alim (2017) note in their work on culturally sustaining pedagogy that maintaining cultural heritage through education is a form of resistance and engagement. Students who interact with community members gain exposure to diverse worldviews and learn the importance of sustaining cultural identities. This experiential approach aligns with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, which posits that meaningful learning occurs through direct experience and reflection.

#### ***The Integration of Cultural Studies Perspectives into Teaching Practices***

In an increasingly pluralistic society, higher education institutions in the Philippines are challenged to prepare students to navigate, respect, and engage with diverse cultural realities. Integrating cultural studies perspectives into teaching practices at Cagayan State University, Mindanao State University, and Isabela State University has shown promise in equipping students with the intercultural competence needed for this task. Findings from the study revealed three dominant themes: the role of critical cultural reflection in helping students examine their assumptions and navigate difference; the power of dialogic engagement in fostering empathy and mutual respect; and the impact of participatory cultural projects in promoting active, experience-based learning across cultural boundaries. Faculty and students highlighted how these approaches deepened their understanding of identity, challenged stereotypes, and encouraged meaningful cross-cultural encounters. Ultimately, the study underscores the transformative role of culturally grounded

pedagogy in shaping socially conscious, interculturally competent learners in Philippine higher education.

#### *Critical Cultural Reflection as a Catalyst for Navigating Diversity*

Instructors at Cagayan State University, Mindanao State University, and Isabela State University emphasized that incorporating cultural studies encouraged students to reflect critically on their cultural assumptions and societal positions. Through texts, case studies, and comparative analyses of various cultural systems, students engaged in self-inquiry and questioned dominant ideologies. This critical reflection enabled them to better navigate multicultural environments with increased sensitivity and awareness. The perspective of cultural studies advocated by Hall (1997) empowers students to see culture as dynamic and contested, equipping them to respond thoughtfully in diverse social contexts.

#### Participant Responses:

*"We were asked to reflect on our biases about other religions in class. It was uncomfortable but eye-opening."*

*"Studying cultural texts helped me realize that what I thought was 'normal' is just what I was used to."*

*"I learned to listen more before reacting to things I did not understand culturally."*

Students developed the ability to suspend judgment and consider multiple cultural standpoints. This aligns with Byram's (1997) intercultural communicative competence framework, where critical cultural awareness is central. Students became better prepared to navigate diversity beyond the classroom by cultivating reflexivity, recognizing how power, privilege, and history shape cultural encounters.

#### *Dialogic Engagement Fosters Respect Across Cultural Boundaries*

Faculty across the three universities adopted dialogic methods such as open forums, story circles, and cultural panels, allowing students to hear diverse voices, including indigenous groups, Muslim communities, and rural populations. This classroom openness created spaces for mutual recognition and respect. Inspired by Freire's (1970) notion of dialogical pedagogy, students did not merely absorb facts

about cultures; they co-constructed understanding through shared narratives and lived experiences.

Participant Responses:

*"Our instructor invited a Lumad elder to speak, and it made us realize how little we knew about local cultures."*

*"During story circles, I saw how diverse our experiences are, even if we are all Filipino."*

*"Respect started when we listened without debating; we just allowed the stories to sink in."*

Dialogic engagement builds empathy and breaks down stereotypes. It helps students humanize others and themselves in intercultural interactions. Banks (2006) says such dialogue-based practices allow learners to develop democratic values and moral reasoning, both crucial for respectful engagement in pluralistic societies.

*Participatory Cultural Projects Enhance Active Engagement with Diversity*

Cultural studies integration extended beyond lectures to include community-based cultural mapping, student-led festivals, and ethnographic projects. These experiential activities pushed students to engage directly with cultural communities and issues. At Mindanao State University, for example, students facilitated intercultural exhibits featuring Maranao art, while at Isabela State University, students documented local folklore and traditions. These projects promoted active learning and civic engagement, rooted in cultural respect.

Participant Responses:

*"Our project on indigenous foodways made me proud and curious about how others eat and live."*

*"By organizing a cultural exhibit, I met people from ethnic groups I had never interacted with before."*

*"Doing fieldwork with local artisans gave us a sense of shared humanity."*

Experiential pedagogy aligns with Dewey's (1938) belief that education must connect with lived experience. Students developed intercultural competence through real-world interaction, collaboration, and cultural co-construction. These experiences fostered a deeper, action-oriented appreciation of diversity, bridging the gap between theory and practice as emphasized by Paris and Alim (2017) in their work on culturally sustaining pedagogies.

## Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the pivotal role of culturally grounded pedagogy in developing intercultural competence within Philippine higher education

institutions, specifically at Cagayan State University, Mindanao State University, and Isabela State University. Integrating local cultural content, storytelling, and community-based learning into teaching practices significantly influenced how students perceive, engage with, and navigate cultural diversity. Instructors' efforts to embed indigenous knowledge, local traditions, and real-life community practices into academic content validated students' cultural identities and encouraged a deeper appreciation of cultural differences. These practices allowed students to reflect on their cultural assumptions, listen empathetically to others, and engage meaningfully with diverse cultural realities.

Recent research supports these findings. Dela Cruz et al. (2025) emphasized that culturally responsive pedagogy enhances learners' intercultural attitudes, values, and behaviors when students are actively involved in knowledge construction grounded in their cultural contexts. Similarly, dialogic teaching and narrative-sharing have been recognized as effective strategies for building empathy and mutual respect (Camero et al., 2025). Incorporating cultural studies perspectives into classroom instruction, such as critical reflection on cultural texts and participatory projects, empowered students to think beyond stereotypes and recognize the socio-political dimensions of culture. These methods aligned with experiential learning models, particularly those described by Dewey (1938) and more recently expanded upon by the Annals of Global Health (2023), which highlight the importance of real-world engagement in shaping intercultural competence.

Furthermore, the study emphasized the importance of institutional support in fostering a culture of inclusion and respect. When higher education institutions embrace cultural responsiveness as an educational philosophy rather than a mere teaching strategy, they position themselves to cultivate globally aware, socially responsible graduates. Faculty and student narratives in this study reveal that culturally grounded pedagogy affirms local heritage and prepares students to become active participants in an increasingly diverse and interconnected world.

## Conclusions

Based on the results and findings of the study conducted across Cagayan State University, Mindanao State University, and Isabela State University, several conclusions can be drawn regarding integrating cultural studies perspectives and the practice of culturally grounded pedagogy in higher education. First, culturally responsive teaching strategies that draw on local knowledge, traditions, and lived experiences significantly affirm students' cultural identities and foster mutual respect. This pedagogical approach enables learners to engage deeply with their heritage while

simultaneously appreciating and understanding the diversity of others, forming a strong foundation for intercultural competence.

Second, dialogic teaching methods, including storytelling and open classroom discussions, have proven effective in creating safe, inclusive spaces where students can share, reflect on, and learn from one another's cultural backgrounds. These practices humanize classroom interactions and promote empathy, critical consciousness, and meaningful engagement with cultural differences. They support the development of globally competent individuals who are sensitive to cultural nuances and better equipped for diverse environments.

Lastly, implementing community-based and experiential learning projects such as cultural mapping, documentation of local traditions, and immersion with indigenous and rural communities further enhances the real-world application of intercultural values. These practices bridge theoretical instruction with lived cultural realities, allowing students to experience culture as dynamic, relevant, and integral to social development. In conclusion, culturally grounded pedagogy, when meaningfully embedded into teaching practices, acts as a transformative educational strategy that not only enriches learning outcomes but also prepares students to become socially aware, culturally respectful and globally engaged citizens.

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