

ENHANCING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE THROUGH DOCUMENTARY-BASED ASSIGNMENTS: A MIXED-METHODS STUDY



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Abstract

Educators seek innovative methods to develop intercultural competence. This need has grown increasingly urgent as students prepare to live and work in a globally interconnected world where navigating cultural differences is critical to personal and professional success. This study evaluated documentary-based assignments' effectiveness in enhancing college students' intercultural competence, employing a mixed-methods approach grounded in Transformative Learning Theory and the Intercultural Communication Competence framework. The documentary "Living on One Dollar" was analyzed using a convergent mixed-methods design, where pre- and post-test surveys were used for the quantitative section, and pre-reflective and reflective open-ended questions were used for the qualitative section. Quantitative results indicated significant improvements in students' cultural knowledge and sensitivity, though practical skill application showed less progress. Qualitative data revealed increased empathy and global engagement desires. Integrating documentaries with reflective and experiential learning is recommended to maximize practical skill development. Educators should select diverse documentaries, facilitate thematic discussions, and implement scenario-based assessments.

Keywords: intercultural competence, documentary-based assignments, mixed-methods study, higher education

In today's globalized world, understanding intercultural communication is essential for engaging with individuals from different backgrounds (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). This type of communication involves interacting with people from various cultural settings, requiring an understanding of their customs, beliefs, and communication styles (Brooks et al., 2019). While differences in language, nonverbal cues, and cultural perceptions can present challenges, they also create opportunities for growth (Chen & Starosta, 1996; Suarez et al., 2019).

Educators continually seek innovative teaching methods to develop intercultural competence (Cano et al., 2022; Suarez et al., 2019). One effective approach is integrating documentaries into educational curricula (Daniels, 2012; Nichols, 2017). In today's digital era, visual media significantly influence learning, and documentaries provide real-life examples that immerse students in cultural complexities (Mayer, 2008; Roell, 2010). Beyond their informational value, documentaries are powerful tools for promoting critical thinking by presenting real-world issues and diverse perspectives, encouraging students to analyze, question, and synthesize information (Bernard, 2022; Daniels, 2012; Nichols, 2017).

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Using films and videos in educational settings has proven effective in fostering intercultural competencies (Roell, 2010). Documentaries, in particular, allow students to engage with culturally different narratives, broadening their perspective on global experiences. When combined with experiential learning and reflective practices, these visual materials help students navigate cultural differences, adapt to unfamiliar situations, and refine their communication skills (Pandey & Ardichvili, 2015). Moreover, documentaries support reflective learning by prompting students to examine their assumptions, fostering greater self-awareness and a deeper appreciation for different viewpoints (Miller & Konstantinou, 2021).

Despite the recognized potential of documentaries in intercultural education, there remains a notable gap in research evaluating their effectiveness in enhancing intercultural competencies within the United States. While studies have demonstrated positive outcomes in various international contexts—such as China (Tao et al., 2024), Colombia (Cano et al., 2022), Brunei and Romania (Popa et al., 2021), and Indonesia (Susilo et al., 2023)—similar investigations within U.S. educational settings are limited. Notably, Blum and Smythe (2021) evaluated the importance of documentary film in an online course, but comprehensive studies in traditional U.S. classrooms are scarce.

Traditional teaching methods, including lectures and presentations, often fall short of conveying the depth of intercultural understanding. In contrast, documentary analysis offers a dynamic and immersive alternative, enabling students to engage with real-world scenarios and diverse perspectives (Ashwin et al., 2020). By conceptualizing studies around the use of documentaries, educators can foster knowledge co-creation, ensuring that participants' voices and experiences are prioritized and represented through visual storytelling (Borish et al., 2021).

Conceptual Framework

This research explores how documentaries can be used to develop and assess intercultural competencies in diverse U.S. educational settings. It aims to evaluate the effectiveness of documentary-based assignments in fostering intercultural competence among students, addressing a current research gap, and advancing intercultural education.

This research is framed within two main approaches: Transformative Learning [TL] (Mezirow, 1991) and Intercultural Communication Competence [ICC] (Byram, 1997). Connecting TL Theory and the ICC Framework provides a robust theoretical foundation for understanding how documentary analysis can enhance intercultural competence.

The TL Theory was developed by Jack Mezirow (1991), positing that learning is a change process involving transforming people's beliefs, attitudes, and emotions. The main components of this theory are disorienting dilemmas, critical reflection, rational discourse, and action (Mezirow, 1991; Mezirow, 1997). In this context, using this documentary with students serves as a disorienting dilemma by challenging their preconceived notions about

cultural differences and engaging them in critical reflection through pre-reflection and reflection assignments. Class discussions and written reports also provide a medium for rational discourse, allowing students to apply what they learn in real-world scenarios.

As Mezirow (1991) described, TL can be defined as learning that changes our thinking, making us more open, thoughtful, and ready to adapt emotionally. TL emphasizes adult learning as a process of reinterpreting past experiences to redesign and guide future actions. On the other hand, the ICC framework is a model used to outline knowledge, attitudes, and skills [KAS] for effective communication in intercultural contexts (Byram, 1997). In addition to the KSA, this framework includes internal and external outcomes as key components (Byram, 1997). This theory emphasizes learning and understanding cultural differences (Hoff, 2020). In this context, the documentary aims to expose students to cultural differences, including customs, values, and communication styles. Ideally, students will develop skills in interpreting and relating cultural information and improve their attitudes through reflective assignments.

Purpose and Objectives

This study examined the effectiveness of a documentary-based assignment as a tool to enhance students' learning experiences. The following research objectives guided this study.

1. Explore students' expectations towards using documentaries as a learning channel.
2. Examine the impact of documentary-based assignments on developing students' intercultural competency.

Methodology

A convergent parallel mixed methods research approach was implemented since we collected quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously and integrated the information to interpret the overall results (Brannen, 2005; Creswell, 2014). Regarding philosophical assumptions, we adopted positivist and constructivist paradigms, which permitted flexibility of choice in methods, techniques, and research procedures to best meet the needs of the study (Creswell, 2014).

Course Description

This research was conducted in an intercultural communication course at the University of Florida and was approved by the Institutional Review Board ET00020867. The course's learning objectives focused on developing learners' competencies to communicate with people from other cultures effectively. The course incorporates assignments, such as country comparison presentations, bi-weekly quizzes, and cultural reflections. Learners had a documentary analysis assignment as a class requirement, but participation in the research was optional.

Assignment Description

The documentary "Living on One Dollar" (n.d.) was chosen for the Documentary Reflection assignment due to the insightful reflections generated by students in previous courses after watching it. The film follows the experiences of four college students who spent one month living under the same cultural and socioeconomic conditions as a community in Guatemala. This documentary provides a valuable opportunity for learners to evaluate their journey and apply class content. The characters in the documentary are similar in age to traditional undergraduate learners, and like the students in the class, they developed intercultural competencies by navigating a different cultural environment.

Data Collection

Firstly, before watching the documentary, learners were asked to 1) complete a survey on their previous experiences using documentaries to evaluate their perception of documentaries and 2) write a pre-reflection on their perspective about the activity. After watching the documentary, learners participated in a class discussion identifying and analyzing various concepts of intercultural competencies covered in the film. This included cultural dimensions, instances of cultural relativism, high vs. low context, and non-verbal communication.

Secondly, learners then 1) completed a survey based on their current experience of watching the documentary, and 2) wrote a reflection on their perspectives about the activity. In addition, they submitted their written analysis of the documentary one month after watching it. The population for this research consisted of all students enrolled in a 3000-level course on intercultural communication at the University of Florida (N = 30). The majority of participants were female and pursuing majors related to agricultural education. This course is considered an upper-division, intermediate-level undergraduate class—typically taken by juniors and seniors who have already completed foundational coursework in the discipline. Following the University IRB-approved protocol, twenty-two learners consented to participate in the research and verbally allowed us to include their written assignments in our data analysis.

Instruments

For the quantitative instrument, 14 items were evaluated using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), where participants rated their perceptions of using documentaries to teach intercultural competencies. To ensure the validity and reliability of the quantitative instrument used in this study, a multi-step process was implemented.

First, content validity was established through expert review. Three researchers with backgrounds in intercultural communication and educational assessment evaluated the survey items to confirm alignment with the intended learning outcomes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Haynes et al., 1995). To further strengthen the instrument's design, construct validity was addressed by implementing a mirrored pre- and post-assessment structure. Each item was carefully

designed to remain consistent in content and format across both time points (Campbell & Stanley, 1963; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

In terms of reliability, internal consistency was examined through item-level analysis. While the small sample size (N = 22) limited the application of Cronbach's alpha, patterns of consistent responses across pre- and post-assessments provided acceptable evidence of reliability (Streiner, 2003; Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

For the qualitative instrument, two sets of reflective questions were developed: a pre-reflection set with 12 questions and a reflection set with 11 questions. The reflection questions were designed to align with the pre-reflection questions, ensuring a meaningful connection between them. Both the qualitative and quantitative instruments are available in the supplementary materials section of the paper.

Data Analysis

Quantitative

We employed descriptive and inferential statistical analyses for the quantitative phase to assess students' perceptions of using documentaries to develop intercultural competencies. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were utilized to capture the overall shifts in student perceptions. The Wilcoxon signed-ranks test was applied to evaluate the statistical significance of these changes. This test allowed us to examine differences in perceptions before and after the documentary analysis assignment, focusing on specific items related to the students' intercultural learning experiences.

The Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test was chosen because it is a non-parametric statistical test designed for paired data, such as the same group of students' perceptions before and after an intervention. Since the data collected was ordinal (using a 5-point Likert scale), the test does not assume a normal distribution, making it an appropriate choice. The test examines the magnitude and direction of changes in perceptions, providing insight into whether these shifts were statistically significant, especially given the non-normal nature of the data.

Qualitative

Each pre-reflection and reflection was reviewed and coded (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). According to Morse and Richards (2002), the objective of coding is to let the researcher focus and simplify the interpretation of the data. The first series of coding that we implemented was initial open coding, which is helpful for case studies because it lends itself easily to analyzing and redirecting the focus of the data analysis (Saldaña, 2016).

After the open coding, pattern coding was used to pull together the raw material into a more meaningful unit of analysis. This data analysis methodology helped us connect topics, concepts, and themes that emerged from the data (Morse & Richards, 2002). We then grouped the codes into major themes to better understand the phenomenon (Saldaña, 2016).

Trustworthiness

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are the main aspects of research rigor in a qualitative study. Ary et al. (2010) define credibility as the researcher’s responsibility to represent information established in the research as precisely as possible. Researchers used several data sources, such as pre- and post-reflection and quantitative data. There are several ways to guarantee transferability (Cope, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2018), such as providing a detailed description and implementing sampling procedures focused on a specific group; researchers implemented purposive sampling to select the participants based on specific characteristics (Palinkas et al., 2015).

To ensure dependability, provide a detailed account of the research methodology. A double-coding procedure was employed using MAXQDA software codes and two intercoders to ensure coding consistency and comparison (Hanson et al., 2019; Lincoln et al., 1985). Confirmability can be achieved through research reflexivity, where we acknowledge our research limitations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For example, this study is cross-sectional and involved only 22 learners. Consequently, readers should recognize that the findings can only be generalized to the extent readers consider this study to represent a broader issue (Pauly, 1991).

Results

The descriptive statistics indicate a positive student perception shift following the documentary analysis assignment. Most items showed increased mean scores, suggesting enhanced intercultural awareness and engagement. The most notable change was observed in the item "Think beyond surface-level cultural representations and delve deeper into underlying themes and messages" (4.09 to 4.73). Similarly, "The assignment effectively engages me in meaningful intercultural dialogues and discussions" saw a substantial rise from 3.96 to 4.68. Other notable improvements included "I recommend documentary analysis assignments to other students to enhance their learning experiences" (3.79 to 4.43). On the other hand, the item with the smallest change was "I would have preferred a different assignment to assess my understanding of the concept," which slightly decreased from 2.91 to 2.82. A minor decline was noted in "I appreciate the differences of cultural perspectives represented in documentaries" (4.39 to 4.32), though the overall perception remained positive. Table 1 provides a detailed overview of these findings.

Table 1

Item Comparison Before and After Watching the Documentary.

Item	Before the Documentary...		After the Documentary...	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1. Aware of cultural differences.	4.29	0.55	4.39	0.72
2. teach me more cultural nuances such as customs, values, and traditions.	3.63	1.06	4.22	0.67
3. Sensitive to cultural nuances such as customs, values, and traditions.	3.92	0.78	4.57	0.73
4. Apply intercultural communication skills to real-world contexts.	4.13	0.68	4.35	0.78
5. It makes me think critically about the portrayal of cultural interactions in films.	4.17	0.70	4.30	1.06
6. It makes me analyze the depiction of cultural differences in films and their implications.	4.17	0.76	4.61	0.58
7. I recommend documentary analysis assignments to other students to enhance their learning experiences.	3.79	1.06	4.43	0.66
8. I am delighted with this assignment’s depth of cultural exploration.	3.91	0.95	4.52	0.59
9. Think beyond surface-level cultural representations and delve deeper into underlying themes and messages.	4.09	0.73	4.73	0.46
10. The assignment effectively engages me in meaningful intercultural dialogues and discussions.	3.96	0.71	4.68	0.57
11. I explored cultural elements beyond what is explicitly shown in the documentary.	3.61	0.84	4.32	0.72
12. I appreciate the differences in cultural perspectives represented in documentaries.	4.39	0.58	4.32	0.78
13. I enjoy this assignment.	4.13	0.76	4.64	0.58
14. I would have preferred a different assignment to assess my understanding of the concept.	2.91	1.08	2.82	1.50

Objective 1

Quantitative Phase

The study examined students' expectations for gaining intercultural knowledge through documentaries as a learning tool. Learners assessed their perspectives on utilizing documentaries for learning evaluation, with items 7, 8, 13, and 14 analyzed to address this objective. For item 7 ("*I recommend documentary analysis assignments to other students to enhance their learning experiences*"), the results showed a significant increase in students' willingness to recommend similar tasks ($Z = -2.31, p = 0.02$), indicating a positive shift in students' perceptions of the assignment's value in enhancing peer learning. For item 8 ("*I am delighted with this assignment's depth of cultural exploration*"), the results also demonstrated a significant improvement in satisfaction ($Z = -2.43, p = 0.01$), suggesting that the assignment effectively deepened students' engagement with cultural exploration.

For item 13 ("*I enjoy this assignment*"), the results indicated a significant increase in enjoyment levels ($Z = -2.68, p = 0.04$), confirming that students found the assignment more enjoyable after completing it. The results did not indicate a significant change for item 14 ("*I would have preferred a different assignment to assess my understanding of the concept*") ($Z = -0.17, p = 0.87$), suggesting that students' preferences for alternative assessment methods remained largely unchanged.

Qualitative Phase

Pre-reflection

Participants were asked to share their perceptions during the qualitative phase: "What do you hope to learn or gain from watching this documentary?" Three themes emerged from the data: 1) understanding and empathy, 2) perspective and gratitude, and 3) health and well-being.

Theme 1: Understanding and Empathy

Through data analysis, participants inferred that, based on the title *Living on a Dollar a Day*, they hoped to learn more about empathy. Through the narratives, expressions such as "empathizing more with them" emphasized that the documentary could make them feel strong emotions and help them to think deeply. In addition, participants expressed that it would help them "better understand the people living in this condition," highlighting the documentary's ability to stimulate inquiry into the cultural and economic dimensions of poverty. One of the students expressed ideas such as:

By watching this documentary, I want to further understand extreme poverty and daily life for people in poverty. From severe illness, steep medical costs, and the impossibility of getting a loan from a traditional bank to start a business, people living in poor areas face unexpected challenges to get rid of poverty. Besides, I want to know whether an area's culture is related to poverty.

This further emphasizes that the documentary could have the capacity to provoke exploration into cultural dimensions. To support this viewpoint, another student highlighted:

I hope to gain knowledge of this topic; although I have researched this, I still have much to learn. I also hope to have even more empathy for these people who must experience this. People can always learn more, especially about such important topics.

Theme 2: Gratitude

Through analysis, it was evident that students aimed to gain new perspectives and develop a deeper sense of gratitude, as reflected in expressions such as "a better perspective on people's struggles" and "a new perspective on challenges I have not faced." These insights highlight that students perceived that the documentary could effectively broaden students' understanding and foster a deeper appreciation for the challenges others face. One of the students expressed: "I hope I gain a better perspective on the struggles of people in certain parts of the world so I can have a better sense of gratitude in my own life and be more mindful about helping others in need."

Another student supported this comment: "*I also hope to gain a broader perspective on life and privilege, reflect on my circumstances, and appreciate the opportunities and resources I may sometimes take for granted.*"

Theme 3: Health and Well-being

Upon analyzing the results, it was evident that students considered that they would learn about the health of individuals living in extreme poverty, considering the idea of surviving on just one dollar a day is impossible. One student commented:

One dollar is small, so maybe we cannot buy a dozen eggs nowadays. My initial thought about this documentary is one dollar cannot live. If we truly use one dollar to live, it may threaten our health, both medical and physical. We cannot get nutritious food and easily suffer from diarrhea. If we always live in such a condition, we are not happy at all. When we wake up every day, we first need to worry about our lives. Gradually, we will have some mental problems. I want to learn about their strong faith in people living in one-dollar conditions.

To support this viewpoint, another student commented, "*I feel like it is possible to live off a dollar, so I need to be open-minded about the ways people can find food and hospitality without paying for it.*"

Reflection

During the qualitative phase, participants were asked to reflect on what they had learned after watching the documentary. Several themes emerged, including understanding extreme poverty challenges, learning expectations for the documentary, and the impact of witnessing poverty reality.

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Theme 1: Understanding extreme poverty challenges

As a result of watching the documentary, one of the presented outcomes was an increased understanding of extreme poverty challenges, particularly from a cultural perspective. Students explored the challenges faced by those living in extreme poverty, as evidenced by their discussions on the "struggles of poverty" and their deepened "understanding of extreme poverty."

I thought I was doing well with imagining what extreme poverty life would look like until the documentary showed me the depressingly undesirable reality. The video told me that imagining is not enough to understand the situation... and watching the life of the people and their struggles gives us more thoughts and empathy. Moreover, living as one of the people as the filmmakers were doing can contribute to shaping the concrete image and deeper understanding of poverty. When I was watching the documentary, I strongly felt that it would be a true example of "Being in one's shoes."

This highlights the documentary's effectiveness in broadening students' awareness and insights into the complexities of poverty, both socially and culturally. Additionally, another student highlighted:

By understanding these root causes, I aim to contribute to more informed discussions and potentially advocate for policies and initiatives aimed at poverty alleviation. Additionally, this exploration allows me to cultivate a broader perspective on life and the privilege I may often take for granted. I aspire that by witnessing the challenges faced by individuals living in impoverished conditions, I can develop empathy and awareness.

Theme 2: Learning expectations for the documentary

Another results of the documentary was the fulfillment of learning expectations. Students reported that the documentary deepened their understanding and surpassed their initial expectations. They expressed sentiments such as "exceeded my expectations" and "It met my expectations," indicating that the documentary provided valuable insights and exceeded their anticipated learning outcomes. One of the students mentioned: "The documentary surpassed my expectations. Beyond the expected visuals of poverty, it delved deep into individuals' lives, aspirations, and dreams, revealing their unwavering spirit. I gained insight into the close-knit community bonds formed out of necessity and survival."

This demonstrates the documentary's effectiveness in meeting educational objectives and enriching students' understanding of the subject matter beyond what they had anticipated. However, another student mentioned the following:

This document reached my expectations and taught me about extreme poverty and having the power to refute and confirm preconceptions. They may challenge prejudices by presenting a more complex picture of underprivileged communities and showing their resiliency and resourcefulness. They could also emphasize the seriousness of the situation and the pressing need for action.

Theme 3: Impact of Witnessing Poverty Reality

As a result of applying the documentary, it was observed that the impact of witnessing the reality of poverty met expectations and offered valuable insights. Students expressed a desire to learn more effective techniques to save money. One student stated, "I felt like I wanted to learn more effective techniques to save money." Additionally, one of the students expressed:

I learned more effective techniques to save money and make money last longer. The documentary exceeded my expectations, and I was able to learn a lot from it. I learned the most from listening to the local's stories. I gained a lot of respect for the locals for being there for each other and always putting their families first.

Another student further reinforced this perspective by commenting on the following:

I learned how these students persevere through their financial struggles and what they gained from the experience. The students were able to reflect on their process in dealing with financial struggles; as a class peer pointed out, it was somewhat disappointing to see how they did not completely commit to the idea of living in poverty, in which they pulled money from a hat (so they technically had money). Also, they had emergency medication.

Objective 2

Quantitative

The study examined students' perspectives on the effectiveness of documentary-based assignments in fostering intercultural competency. Participants assessed their experiences with this learning approach, with items 2, 3, 4, 5, 11, and 12 analyzed to address this objective.

For item 2 ("*The documentary taught me more about cultural nuances such as customs, values, and traditions*"), the results indicated an increase in students' knowledge of cultural subtleties. However, the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test showed no statistically significant difference ($Z = -1.57$, $p = 0.11$), suggesting that the documentary assignment did not statistically enhance students' understanding of the intricate aspects of different cultures.

For item 3 ("*The documentary made me more sensitive to cultural nuances such as customs, values, and traditions*"), the findings demonstrated a notable increase in students' cultural sensitivity. The Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test showed a statistically significant difference ($Z = -2.45$, $p = 0.01$), indicating that the documentary helped students develop a heightened awareness and appreciation for the subtleties of cultural differences.

For item 4 ("*The documentary helped me apply intercultural communication skills in real-world contexts*"), the results showed increased students' perceived ability to apply these skills. However, the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test did not indicate a statistically significant difference ($Z = -1.41$, $p = 0.16$), suggesting that while students found the assignment beneficial, the observed improvement was not substantial.

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For item 5 (*"The documentary enhanced my critical thinking about cultural interactions in films"*), the results indicated a slight increase in students' critical thinking regarding cultural portrayals. Despite this, the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test revealed no statistically significant difference ($Z = -0.95$, $p = 0.34$), suggesting that students' analytical engagement with cultural interactions remained relatively stable.

For item 11 (*"The documentary encouraged me to explore cultural elements beyond what was shown in the film"*), the results demonstrated a significant increase in students' motivation to explore cultural elements further. The Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test found a statistically significant difference ($Z = -2.68$, $p = 0.01$), indicating that the assignment effectively encouraged students to engage more deeply with cultural topics beyond the documentary.

For item 12 (*"The documentary helped me appreciate the diversity of cultural perspectives depicted in documentaries"*), the results did not indicate a significant change. The Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test showed no statistically significant difference ($Z = -0.17$, $p = 0.87$), suggesting that students' appreciation of cultural diversity remained unchanged.

Qualitative Pre-reflection

Participants were asked to reflect on the use of documentary before and after the assignment. Three themes emerged from the data for the pre-reflection phase: improving communication skills, education and advocacy, and career implications.

Theme 1: Improving Communication Skills

It was evident that one of the outcomes presented was the improvement of communication skills, particularly in the realm of intercultural communication proficiency. Students reflected on how they would apply the content to their lives. In this regard, comments such as "communication skills" and "intercultural communication sensitivity" were reported. For instance, one of the students mentioned: "I could apply sympathy for others to my life and be aware of the struggles people face. In my career, I can use the intercultural communication skills that I have learned, in addition to sympathy, to help others." Another student supported this viewpoint and mentioned: "I also think I would be more inclined in my future career to be more mindful of how I communicate with people from different cultures. I have a professional goal to work for Doctors Without Borders, so what I can learn will be heavy."

Theme 2: Education and Advocacy

Students considered that the topic would provoke a commitment to education and advocacy to promote awareness and advocate for change. Additionally, students recognized the significance of addressing intercultural issues, as one of the students mentioned:

I will be able to apply newfound humility and appreciation to the opportunities I can have. I will also remind myself that everyone around me has not been given the same education and experiences I have had. They may be communicating

differently because of their culture, and I will need to adjust how I address the conversation or topic.

Furthermore, they recognized the importance of addressing intercultural issues, indicating their willingness to advocate for integration and understanding in different cultural contexts, as emphasized by another student: "The importance of education in fostering intercultural competence and reducing stereotypes and biases could be explored. As well as how sustainable development practices can be integrated into poverty alleviation efforts to ensure a long-term positive impact."

Reflection

Participants were prompted to consider applying insights from the documentary to personal or career contexts. Three themes emerged from the data: support through shared understanding, personal connections and communication, and global perspective and understanding.

Theme 1: Supporting through shared understanding

As a result of engaging with the documentary, students demonstrated a commitment to supporting others through shared understanding and actively contributing to solutions. They articulated a desire to make a positive impact on the lives of those in need, as highlighted by one student who stated:

In the future, I would like to work for Doctors Without Borders; however, I am very introverted, so I think I can take something from the documentary and try making stronger connections when interacting with others. There has also always been a part of me that would like to make a scholarship to help those who cannot afford education go to school (hoping that I am better off financially in the future). I am now thinking about expanding it to other countries. The class and the film have given me an idea of how accepting people can be to others entering their community.

The documentary played a key role in fostering empathy and motivating students to seek tangible solutions to complex social problems, thus promoting a culture of compassion and collective support, as another student highlights: "Watching the documentary only enforced this idea that we should always be seeking to help others around the world and not just focus on ourselves."

Theme 2: Personal connections and communication

The documentary's impact on personal connections and communication was evident as students emphasized the importance of non-verbal communication in building relationships. They recognized the significance of non-verbal cues with comments such as "value of nonverbal communication." This insight suggests that the documentary facilitated a deeper understanding of the complexities of human communication, fostering stronger interpersonal connections and empathy among students, as one student mentioned:

The documentary showed me that even though language is an obstacle to many intercultural interactions, it should not stop the interactions from happening. These guys, even though they could not verbally communicate a lot, were still able to make friends and establish themselves

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in the community. It showed me that I should not be limited by not speaking a certain language when meeting new people and making new friendships, because non-verbal communication goes a long way.

Another student was also attracted to learn more about this communication's style, as mentioned:

The insights on intercultural communication were interesting. I recognized the nuances in non-verbal cues and the depth of meaning behind words in diverse cultures. In my future career, especially in potential international interactions, I will approach conversations with an open mind, letting go of any preconceived notions or biases. This will not only foster better relationships but also enhance mutual understanding and collaboration.

Theme 3: Global perspective and understanding

As a result of engaging with the documentary, students gained a broader global perspective and understanding, particularly about their challenges. One student expressed: "It has made me more aware and understanding of the complexity of the challenges that others face. I will try to be more culturally aware going forward." This quote underscores how the documentary prompted students to reflect on their circumstances, considering the hardships experienced by others around the world, as another student mentioned: "Honestly, the challenges I face in my life are minimal compared to the difficulties people in rural Guatemala encounter daily. This perspective allows me to approach my obstacles with a more positive mindset."

Discussion

This study utilized a mixed-methods approach to evaluate the effectiveness of documentary-based assignments in enhancing intercultural competence among university students. While the sample size was limited to 22 participants from a single course section, the findings provided valuable insights into the potential of documentary-based assignments. However, due to the small and context-specific sample, the results should be interpreted with caution and not assumed to represent broader student populations or learning environments without further investigation.

Our findings indicated a significant increase in students' intercultural knowledge and sensitivity. For objective one, the quantitative results demonstrated statistically significant improvements in students' perceptions of the assignment's value, enjoyment, and cultural depth. These findings were supported by qualitative insights, highlighting themes of empathy, gratitude, and the practical challenges of extreme poverty. Similar findings were reported by Popa et al. (2021) in their research with students from Brunei and Romania, who reported increased openness to other cultures. However, our study reveals that knowledge acquisition alone is insufficient for developing practical intercultural communication skills. To maximize the impact of documentaries, they must be integrated with reflective and experiential learning activities. This approach ensures that students gain theoretical understanding and develop the ability to navigate complex intercultural interactions.

For objective two, integrating quantitative and qualitative findings reveals a clear trend. The quantitative data showed statistically significant increases in cultural awareness, understanding, relatability, and interest. Meanwhile, the qualitative findings provided context for these differences, highlighted by students' reflections. They emphasized empathy, socio-economic awareness, and a motivation to explore cultural issues. Similarly, Jin (2023) found that research provided practical insights for educators and institutions in the hospitality industry, enabling them to integrate social media-based intercultural activities. This integration enhances students' intercultural learning experiences and nurtures their intercultural competence. However, in our study, while students showed increased motivation to explore beyond the documentaries, the practical application of intercultural communication skills and critical thinking showed less improvement.

These outcomes were further illuminated by qualitative data. Pre-reflection analyses revealed students' aspirations for improved communication skills, advocacy, and career applications. However, the post-reflection analysis showed that students reported an enhanced understanding of extreme poverty challenges, fulfillment of learning expectations, and intentions to apply insights to personal financial habits. Similarly, Blum and Smythe (2021) observed that students gained insights, expressed empathy, and felt inspired to help others. However, they also noted an ignorance about inequitable power relationships between the US and other countries, producing an "othering" effect. We support their suggestion of engaging learners in research and reflection about local-global connections.

Integrating TL Theory and the ICC framework proved valuable. The documentary was a "disorienting dilemma," prompting critical reflection and enhancing cultural competencies. Susilo et al. (2023) found that video-clip-assisted intercultural tasks promote the development of abilities to identify, interpret, and critically evaluate the intercultural values embedded in the clips. However, our study also highlighted the necessity of reflective practices and experiential learning. The gap between knowledge acquisition and practical application suggests that educators must actively bridge this through targeted activities (Cano et al., 2022).

Similar to the findings of Tao et al. (2024), who reported that movie-based learning increases cultural knowledge and development among Chinese undergraduates, connecting documentary content with experiential learning remains essential. Designing experiential learning activities that directly address themes identified in qualitative data, such as role-playing scenarios focused on "supporting through shared understanding" or simulations emphasizing "personal connections and communication" through non-verbal cues, is crucial. This is important since significant changes have been reported when activities are based on videos presenting different situational and real contexts, promoting cultural knowledge, critical reflection, and experiential analysis (Cano et al., 2022).

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Finally, although this research is context-specific and based on a single course implementation, the findings hold relevance beyond the immediate setting. They could be adapted across disciplines such as sociology, global studies, and education, where intercultural competence is an essential learning objective. For instance, in sociology, documentary-based assignments could prompt students to critically examine cultural norms and social structures; in global studies, they could facilitate deeper engagement with international perspectives; and in teacher education, they might support the development of culturally responsive teaching practices. Institutions can customize these assignments to suit their curricular goals, instructional formats, and student populations, making this approach a flexible and scalable tool for fostering intercultural understanding across diverse educational contexts.

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Supplementary Material 1: Description of the Items in the Pre- and Post-assessment

	Pre-assessment	Post-assessment
1.	A documentary analysis assignment will make me more aware of cultural differences.	The documentary enhanced my awareness of cultural differences.
2.	A documentary analysis assignment will teach me more cultural nuances such as customs, values, and traditions.	The documentary made me more sensitive to cultural nuances such as customs, values, and traditions.
3.	A documentary analysis assignment will make me more sensitive to the cultural nuances present in the film, such as customs, values, and traditions.	The film analysis assignment contributed to my development of intercultural communication skills, such as recognizing non-verbal cues.
4.	A documentary analysis assignment will help me to apply intercultural communication skills to real-world contexts.	I could apply the intercultural communication skills I developed in this assignment to real-world contexts.
5.	A documentary analysis assignment will make me think critically about the portrayal of cultural interactions in films.	The assignment challenged me to think critically about the portrayal of cultural interactions in the film.
6.	A documentary analysis will make me analyze the depiction of cultural differences in films and their implications.	It encouraged me to analyze the film's depiction of cultural differences and their implications.
7.	I recommend documentary analysis assignments to other students to enhance their learning experiences.	I recommend similar assignments to other students to enhance their learning experiences.
8.	I am delighted with this assignment's depth of cultural exploration.	I am delighted with this assignment's depth of cultural exploration.
9.	A documentary analysis assignment will prompt me to think beyond surface-level cultural representations and delve deeper into underlying themes and messages.	The assignment prompted me to think beyond surface-level cultural representations and delve deeper into underlying themes and messages.
10.	The assignment will engage in meaningful intercultural dialogues and discussions effectively.	The assignment enhanced my ability to engage in meaningful intercultural dialogues and discussions.
11.	Before the assignment, I explored cultural elements beyond what is explicitly shown in the documentary.	The assignment encouraged me to explore cultural elements beyond what was explicitly shown in the film.
12.	I appreciate the diversity of cultural perspectives represented in documentaries.	The assignment effectively encouraged me to recognize and appreciate the diversity of cultural perspectives represented in the film.
13.	I expect to enjoy this assignment before starting it.	I enjoyed this assignment.
14.	I would have preferred a different assignment to assess my understanding of the concept.	I would have preferred a different assignment to assess my understanding of the concept.

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Supplementary Material 2: Description of the Items in the Pre- and Post-reflection

Pre-flection	Reflection
What do you think about using documentary to strengthen concepts?	After watching the documentary, what is your understanding of documentaries?
What do you hope to learn or gain from watching this documentary?	What specific insights or knowledge did you gain from the documentary?
Are there any preconceived notions or stereotypes you might need to set aside to approach this topic with an open mind?	Were you able to set aside any preconceived notions or stereotypes while watching the documentary? Share instances where your perspective evolved.
How can watching this documentary potentially change your perspective on the challenges faced by people living in extreme poverty?	Reflect on how the documentary changed or deepened your understanding of the challenges those living in extreme poverty face.
Consider the role of storytelling in documentaries. How can the medium of film influence our understanding of complex issues such as poverty and intercultural communication?	Discuss the effectiveness of storytelling in the documentary. How did the medium of film enhance your comprehension of complex intercultural issues?
How have you applied the knowledge earned from watching the documentary to your personal life or future career?	Discuss how the insights from the documentary can be applied to your personal life or future endeavors, particularly in intercultural communication.
Do you believe that watching a documentary about poverty and intercultural communication comes with any responsibilities or potential actions afterward?	Evaluate whether the documentary addressed the questions or topics you hoped to see and share any additional questions that emerged while watching.