DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 369 112 CS 508 549

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TITLE The Classroom as a Third-Culture: Contemporary Perspectives Regarding Multicultural Communication Education.
PUB DATE 25 Feb 94
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (79th, Miami Beach, FL, November 18-21, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Information Analyses (070) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cultural Context; Cultural Differences; Curriculum Development; Elementary Secondary Education; Ethnocentrism; Higher Education; *Intercultural Communication; Literature Reviews; *Multicultural Education; Research Needs; Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS Culture Based Curriculum

ABSTRACT

This paper reviews and analyzes current literature addressing the issue of multicultural communication education. The notions of ethnorelativity and relational empathy are investigated in the paper and introduced as the components of third-culture building (a dynamic and creative process through which individuals construct a new and mutually advantageous group reality). The paper then examines the theory regarding third-culture building, and its relevance to communication education in multicultural settings are questioned and noted. The paper also discusses intercultural communication curriculum development and the role of the multicultural communication instructor. The concluding section delineates areas of concern and suggestions for future research. Contains 22 references. (RS)

The Classroom as a Third-Culture: Contemporary Perspectives Regarding Multicultural Communication Education

by

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Running head: MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western States Communication Association, San Jose, California, 25 February 1994.

Abstract

This essay is a review and analysis of current literature addressing the issue of multicultural communication education. The notions of ethnorelativity and relational empathy are investigated and introduced as the components of third-culture building; moreover, the theory regarding third-culture building is examined and its relevance to communication education in multicultural settings questioned and noted. Intercultural communication curriculum development and the role of the multicultural communication instructor are also discussed. The paper finishes with a brief conclusion section that delineates areas of concern and suggestions for future research.

The Classroom as a Third-Culture: Contemporary Perspectives Regarding Multicultural Communication Education

Today the world is in a state of major transition resulting from economic, political, and social tensions. Illusions of national independence are being replaced with the realities of interdependent needs; thus, isolationism is no longer fashionable or economically feasible. Advances in media technologies further diminish an already shrinking globe; leaders and citizens of diverse cultures face each other daily to account for their actions in a particular hemisphere. As national borders weaken or dissolve, the unique value systems and social customs they contain flow into other cultural systems of the world. Moreover, it is estimated that two-thirds of these immigrants settle in the United States (Ostermeier, 1992). This influx of potential citizens presents the US with unique opportunities for socio-cultural expansion; however, the benefits of cultural diversity are often overshadowed by the difficult task of mass assimilation. In some cases, apathy and/or bigotry are used as buffers and wedged between new and existing cultures. Unfortunately, the resulting separation of cultures invariably divides the people they represent.

Education is the primary tool needed to combat intercultural misunderstandings and promote positive multicultural interactions (Cushner, & Trifonovitch, 1989). As time progresses, the opportunities for educational institutions to influence the quality of communication interaction among their multicultural population increases. Projections indicate that Anglo students will only account for 54.5 percent of the academic population by the year 2020 (Banks, 1991). Thus, educators and administrators must design and implement curriculums that account for the differing life experiences of non-Anglo students (Araujo, Jensen, & Kelley, 1991; O'Connor, 1989; Koester, & Lustig, 1991). Furthermore, if instructors wish to be effective educators in culturally diverse classrooms they must become multiculturally affluent themselves.

The purpose of this essay, therefore, is to analyze and adjudicate current theoretical postulations revealed in the field of multicultural communication education and discuss their relevance or applicability to the multicultural educator/institution. Moreover, this paper is an

accumulation of information from varying fields of study; thus, the schools of speech communication, education, and even sociology are represented. Some difficulty arises, however, in the interpretation of the many and varied pieces of social scientific literature encompassing multiculturalism and communication education; it often becomes troublesome to distinguish between the concept of training instructors how to teach multicultural communication and training instructors how to cultivate/manage communication interaction within a multicultural classroom. After sincere reflection, it is clear that no significant differences exist. Instructors working within culturally diverse classrooms, and multicultural communication professors alike, must strive to comprehend and affirm effective communication principles/strategies that support the needs of all their students; therefore, this paper identifies educators within either of these situations as multicultural communication instructors.

The literature review begins by rendering a definition of multicultural communication that adequately reflects the attitudes inherent in this paper (i.e., multicultural interaction is a dynamic and creative process). Then, a discussion of third-culture building results in the exposition of its components and their functions within the process. The following sections discuss methods for presenting information in the multicultural environment and the implied responsibilities of the instructor. The paper concludes with a discussion section that delineates the researcher's questions, disagreements, and proposals for future areas of research.

Choosing a Definition of Multicultural Communication

There are several postulations regarding the interpretation of multicultural/intercultural communication (Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, & Wiseman, 1991). Theorists in general tend to align themselves with one definition or another based on the disposition of their research; thus, researchers usually adopt definitions that promote their particular interests or needs in respect to the field of communication. Growing political and economic factions often require current information about the cultural character of a particular group of people; consequently, the writings of many theorists focus on survival skills for business executives in foreign lands

(Cushner, 1988). Earlier communication theorists also tend to concentrate more on explication of differing cultural norms and value orientations rather than the interaction process itself (e.g., Condon and Yousef 1975; Sitaram & Cogdell, 1976). Thus, many of the earlier definitions of multicultural communication are often quite general and lack definitive parameters (Asuncion-Lande, 1990). Some of the more current researchers, however, are approaching the field from a different perspective and require a more precise definition.

Asuncion-Lande (1990) maintains that researchers are taking a greater interest in the dynamism of multicultural interaction and its creative process. She offers a definition that delineates the charismatic demeanor of multicultural interaction as a creative and influential process:

> Intercultural communication refers to the process of symbolic interaction involving individuals or groups who possess recognized cultural differences in perception and behavior that will significantly affect the manner, the form, and the outcome of the encounter. (p. 213)

Multicultural communication, therefore, is a dynamic and highly creative process through which individuals may construct new and mutually advantageous group realities; Casmir and Asuncion-Lande (1989) view this process as the fabrication of a third-culture.

Building A Third-Culture

The first step in teaching instructors how to build a third-culture is to explain the process through which mainstream cultures originate. Cushner and Trifonovitch (1989) assert that culture is often the product of perennial socialization and unbridled ethnocentrism.

Socialization, according to Cushner and Trifonovitch, is the means by which societies propagate their selective code of behavioral and/or ideological hierarchies among group members; thus, socialization is an ubiquitous social tool that directs, monitors, and chides individuals into culturally cohesive units. A child who is reared, for example, by parents who discourage the open communication of emotions usually does not learn to express feelings; moreover, they are likely to

denigrate others who are emotionally demonstrative. Cushner and Trifonovitch further warn that the inherent strength of the socialization process often impairs social vision; that is, it serves to blind individuals to the existence of alternate social perspectives. Thus, the aforementioned child may never learn to accept overt displays of affection as culturally viable communicative expressions. The myopic vision of the socialized individual customarily leads to a tenaciously established ethnocentrism.

Cushner and Trifonovitch recognize the utility of ethnocentrism and readily note its propensity for strengthening intracultural relations; however, they caution that excessive ethnocentrism severely hinders intercultural communication interactions. They continue by suggesting that instructors/individuals must strive to recognize and neutralize their personal ethnocentristic attitudes:

> A reasonable goal in cross-cultural training or intercultural education is to help others develop an *ethnorelative* [italics added] perspective: that is, the ability to understand that there are equally valid ways of viewing the world. In addition, we must help people learn how to accept ethnocentrism as a fact about themselves as well as others (Cushner & Trifonovitch, 1989, p. 319).

Consequently, recognizing personal ethnocentristic biases and achieving an *ethnorelative* perspective places instructors at the next step in the construction of a third-culture: understanding and achieving cultural empathy.

Broome's (1991) discussion on cultural empathy serves two functions pertinent to this investigation: (1) it repudiates certain preexisting ideologies concerning the nature of cultural empathy; and, (2) it renders an exceptionally sagacious interpretation of relational empathy.

Broome begins by warning the instructor against magnifying the role of accuracy in their quest for cultural empathy. The notion of accuracy, he maintains, deceives the communicator by suggesting that he/she can know the mind of another. The absurdity of this philosophy is multiplied when students and instructors from divergent cultural backgrounds interact. A mock

communication interaction between two Japanese foreign exchange students and their Euro-American professor adequately illustrates this point. In a genuine display of concern, the professor offers her two exchange students a ride home. Wishing to avoid the impending rainstorm, both students are inclined to accept her kind offer; however, Japanese culture requires the students to respectfully decline her invitation approximately three times before accepting. Upon the students' first declination, the instructor graciously withdrawals her offer and departs. Thus, interaction is impaired because the professor, perhaps ethnocentristically, assumes that her socio-cultural lexicon includes the intrinsic meaning of the Japanese students' message.

Another interpretation that Broome discourages places greater emphasis on the emotional rather than the cognitive disposition of cultural empathy. He contends that these theorists assume that cultural empathy transpires when an individual matches another person's level of expressed emotion. Broome continues by enumerating two major flaws inherent in this theory. First, an entirely emotional perspective of cultural empathy does not account for the role of cognition in multicultural interaction: i.e., cognition takes place whether participants exchange meanings or recognize/label the interaction as futile. Second, this definition blurs the line of demarcation that separates empathy from sympathy: "Sympathy is based on projection and depends on similarity, making it inappropriate for the intercultural encounter" (Broome, 1991, p. 238). Thus, sympathy requires a shared socio-cultural value system that inherently precludes the transpiration of intercultural empathy.

Broome concludes that empathy is a charismatic blend of cognitive and affective efforts. He further asserts that it is crucial to keep an open-mind during interaction and advises participants to remain mentally and emotionally adaptable. Moreover, he commends the creative capacity of cultural empathy and lauds it as the process of third-culture building:

> Empathy...is part of an on-going, corrective process that is dynamic and circular. In this way, it reflects the interdependence of participants and the transactional nature of

> communication. Thus, relational empathy allows two individuals to move toward *varying degrees of understanding* [italics his]. (p. 241)

Relational empathy, therefore, is a process whereby individuals from varying cultural backgrounds create a mutually beneficial forum for communication interaction (i.e., a third-culture). Broome maintains that this dynamic interpretation of relational empathy offers realistic goals for instructors placed in multicultural environments; it is particularly pragmatic when compared to the goals of reading minds and/or matching emotions.

The product of relational empathy is a new set of cultural definitions that are unique to the interactants' relationship. These distinctive definitions are often, but not always, augmentations of social values and norms from their varying systems. Communicators mutually agree to adapt and utilize these meanings/behaviors during communication interactions; thus, interactants design and build their own culture in which they can communicate safely and with an ample degree of structure (Broome, 1991; Casmir, & Asuncion-Lande, 1989). Casmir (1991) makes an assertion regarding third-cultures that is particularly important to the instructor in the multicultural classroom:

> ...third-culture building includes a conscious attempt to better understand the component parts of a climate of care, concern, and mutual respect, rather than one of confrontation based on persuasion paradigms that require submission by some and domination by others. (p. 233)

The likelihood of building a successful third-culture, therefore, depends entirely on the instructor's ability to achieve an ethnorelative perspective. Equality is the hallmark of positive multicultural communicaction and instructors must be careful not to allow their personal values to dominate interactions.

Asuncion-Lande (1990, p. 220) presents a paradigm for the advancement of multicultural communication that condenses the preceding four pages of text into three corresponding prescriptions: *self-awareness*, *open-mindedness*, and *flexibility & creativity*. *Self-awareness* is

Asuncion-Lande's prescribed method for achieving an ethnorelative position. According to her article, instructors must strive to understand the meanings and origins of their own cultural ideologies before they can comprehend the intricate communication and behavior systems of another culture. Her assertion, therefore, is that people are more likely to be tolerant of alternate realities when they recognize the arbitrary nature of there own cultural corporeality. Consequently, multicultural interactants must learn to question their initial assumptions regarding the behaviors and/or self-expressions of others (e.g., Why do I believe this way? Is what I'm saying/doing accurate or fair?).

Asuncion-Lande (1990) uses the term *open-mindedness* to address the issues of cross-cultural labeling (stereotyping) and cultural relativism. She explains that sweeping generalizations and uneducated criticisms of a culture are inherently deceptive and often oversimplify the intricate inner-workings of a society. Moreover, unrestrained ethnocentrism usually leads to the development of stereotypes that dehumanize an entire culture in the eyes of the person/s using the label/s. Another important aspect of open-mindedness is the "acceptance of cultural relativism" (p. 220). Cultural relativism is simply a different term for ethnorelativism; accordingly, individuals learn to appreciate the value of differing cultural systems and support their continued expansion.

Individuals must exhibit *flexibility and creativity* in order to be competent multicultural communicators (note that creativity and flexibility are two major components in the creation of third-cultures). As cultures meet, values and behavioral norms begin to intermingle. Those who adapt to the changes continue to grow and prosper in their evolving multicultural surroundings; however, those who remain steadfast in their ethnocentristic ways only experience more discomfort as cultural boundaries continue to overlap (Asuncion-Lande, 1990).

Methods for Teaching Multicultural Communication

This section of the paper is an analysis and discussion of three approaches used to teach multicultural communication: (1) cultural-general, (2) cultural-specific, and (3) experiential learning/training. There are several more specific course designs currently used in communication

education (e.g., Wurzel, & Holt, 1991); however, most of them fall under one of the following three approaches.

The *culture-general* approach to teaching multicultural communication focuses on self-analysis and evaluation. This approach, also referred to as "cultural self-awareness training" (Cushner, 1988, p.169), instructs communicators to introspectively investigate the genesis and continuation of their personal value systems. Thus, students are encouraged to question why they believe particular things and behave in certain ways in order to better understand the complex workings of the socialization process itself (Cushner, 1988; Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, & Wiseman, 1991). The reported benefits of a culture-general approach are forbearance when facing difficult multicultural interactions and an increased interest in the value systems of others (Asuncion-Lande, 1990).

A *culture-specific* education, often called "cognitive training" (Cushner, 1988, p.169), is generally used to train individuals who are planing to visit a particular culture; thus, classes are designed around the cultural communication attributes of one specific group (Asuncion-Lande, 1990; Cushner, 1988; Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, & Wiseman, 1991). An inherent problem with this method is that specific information about one culture does not usually translate to another (Sudweeks, 1991). A person taking a trip to Mexico, for example, may take a course delineating the cultural practices and folklore of that nation; the information, however, is unique to the Mexican people and dose not apply in France. Another problem is finding competent instructors. Culture-specific instructors must be experts on whatever culture they teach (Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, & Wiseman, 1991).

Experiential learning/training promotes firsthand experience in the multicultural communication education of students. "Experiential learning refers to the process of learning by doing" (Asuncion-Lande, 1990, p. 221). Guided immersion into another culture is the characteristic theme of this instructional approach. Special activities like group trips to cultural events and/or work assignments in culturally diverse neighborhoods are an important part of this

type of training (Cushner, 1988). Foeman (1991) notes that the experiential approach is particularly successful in the area of race relations:

> ...[Researchers] found that prejudice reduction was a function of personal contact with members of another race. The researchers also discovered that change established as a result of cross-racial contact groups persisted in follow-up testing that occurred six weeks after groups were disbanded. (pp. 258-259)

These results suggest that experiential learning/training is important in building a successful third-culture; moreover, it is important that instructors make these opportunities readily available to multicultural students.

Curriculum & Materials

The practice of choosing mutually beneficial educational information and materials is an important part of any successful program. This is particularly true, however, in the multicultural classroom where many of the traditional teaching aids and communicative forms no longer represent the life experiences of all students (Cohen, Lombard, & Pierson, 1992; Koester, & Lustig, 1991). This subject alone occupies the pages of many books and deserves a great deal more attention than given here. However, for the sake of brevity, there are only four items chosen to represent this vast area of concern: textbook selection, test bias, parental & community involvement, and incorporation of the arts.

Choosing a good text for any class is an important task. Gollnick and Chinn (1983, chap. 9) warn that many of the textbooks currently used in education express some form of bias against a group of people. Furthermore, they suggest that instructors and administrators guard against the use of these texts by recognizing the six general forms in which prejudice usually appears: *invisibility*, *stereotyping*, *selectivity & imbalance*, *unreality*, *fragmentation or isolation*, and *language*.

Invisibility transpires when the culture of any student or group within the class is not represented by the text. Many of the older class texts, for example, are written for middle class,

Euro-American students; ironically, these books are still being used in lower income areas that are predominantly non-Anglo.

Stereotyping takes place when particular mannerisms or features, usually undesirable, are designated to minority characters in the text. An example of stereotyping is the depiction of Gay women as tough bikers or Gay men as effeminate.

S*electivity & Imbalance* become an issue when information and/or circumstances are presented from a culturally/ethnically predominant viewpoint. A good example of this is presenting the ideal university professor as white, republican, and male.

Unreality is a distortion of facts that leads readers to believe a myth over reality. When a reader believes, for example, that males do not study home economics because the text illustrations depict females performing household chores.

Fragmentation or Isolation occurs when texts separate discussions on various co-cultures from the larger population according to their cultural/ethnic backgrounds. Thus, the achievements of the smaller groups appear less important than those of the larger population.

Language is perhaps the most insidious of the six forms. The exclusive use of Euro-American names and gender specific language exemplifies this particular bias (e.g., John instead of Juan, or mankind over humankind). By following these six guidelines, the instructor and/or administrator can make intelligent choices regarding the selection of educational texts.

Creating valid testing instruments is another important part of building a viable academic curriculum in the multicultural environment. In order to be useful, the students must understand the language and social referents used on an exam. In many cases, students from varying socio-cultural backgrounds predominantly use language and phraseology that functions within their co-culture. The problem is that they may not have the same vocabulary as the middle-class, Euro-American, student for whom the test is designed; thus, they are often penalized academically and labeled intellectually inferior by instructors and institutions (Barger, 1991). Instructors in the

multicultural classroom, therefore, must find a way to incorporate the various cultural experiences of their students into the curriculum.

The success of a multicultural program, particularly for primary and secondary students, depends on the instructor's ability to create a classroom culture, i.e., third-culture, that is conducive to group learning. That is, each student must feel relatively secure/comfortable in their academic surroundings. Ploumis-Devick (1992) addresses this issue by asserting that a communion between home and school is requisite for third-culture building: "...learning occurs within a cultural context. If academic success is to be applicable to all students, then the school environment must strive to interface with the external environment of every child" (p. 19). It is further her contention that parental involvement serves to decrease whatever cultural barriers exist between home and school; accordingly, parents are invited to visit classes and share their varied life/cultural experiences with students and instructors. This is particularly helpful to the instructor who may be dealing with unfamiliar value systems. In many cultures, for example, avoiding direct eye contact with an elder is a sign of deference; however, many Euro-American instructors view this action as an act of defiance.

Community involvement is another important aspect of this program. Members of the community, representing various cultural/ethnic backgrounds, are invited to interact with the students/instructors. Guests explain their differing roles within the community and discuss the difficulties and pleasures they encounter as a result of membership in the larger culture. A few good examples of this type of exercise are career day on the local high school campus and the "Officer Friendly" visits from local law enforcement officers. At the college level, mentoring plays an important role in the continued academic success of particular co-cultures. Kalbfleisch and Davies (1991) report that many African-American professionals attribute their educational and/or professional success to same-race mentors. Whether they are business executives or academicians, mentors can make a difference in the multicultural education environment.

Ploumis-Devick (1992) also proposes that the arts reach beyond limiting social mind-sets and create unique cross-cultural understandings within individuals and among groups:

> One method of exploring the history, norms, and values of cultural groups is through various forms of art. The arts, whether visual, aural, formal, or folk, offer important insight into the past and present of an ethnic group. The arts have a unique way of transcending nation and cultural boundaries as they reflect the past, present, and future of humankind. They reach us through our senses, our emotions and our intellect. (p. 20)

Open communication about performances is encouraged and often leads to an in-depth investigation of the artist's cultural history and social values. Thus, the arts open cultural doors and often affect/effect students in ways that mere lectures may not.

The Instructor's Role

Most of the current literature addressing multicultural education places a great deal of responsibility for students' communication and academic success onto the course instructor. Foeman (1991) offers an excellent definition of the multicultural trainer's/instructor's responsibilities to the class:

> The role of the trainer/facilitator is to establish, articulate, and reiterate group goals throughout training. Trainers also facilitate discussion, comment on group process, encourage the participation of all members, move discussions toward mutual understanding and respect, and provide contextual information. (p. 261)

Briefly stated, the instructor must constantly strive for an ethnorelative position; it may help to follow the three guidelines discussed earlier (i.e., self-awareness, open-mindedness, and flexibility and creativity).

Self-awareness is often a difficult process for many people. Moreover, it is important to remember that instructors are people first and educators second; thus, quite often they harbor particular biases that may shock even themselves (Araujo, Jensen, & Kelley, 1991). Therefore,

regular intrapersonal communication sessions can help the instructor to identify and overcome personal weaknesses.

Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, and Wiseman (1991) broach the question of the instructor's teaching style. They basically offer a condensed version of Gollnick and Chinn's text book queries and suggest they be applied to the instructors teaching style (e.g., is the language used culturally neutral and/or do the examples reflect the cultural makeup of the class). Furthermore, they assert that congruency between the instructor's in-class and out-of-class behavior is crucial; credibility is an important factor and students like to see instructors demonstrate as well as discuss principles.

Conclusions and Suggestions

The notions and/or theories discussed and critiqued in this paper are chosen because of their perceived utility in the field of multicultural communication education. Much of the practical application information above comes from the field of education itself. However, certain concepts presented in the text are broached with vague explanations as to their application in the multicultural classroom. Relational empathy and third-culture building are two such seemingly esoteric theories.

The presentations on achieving relational empathy and building a third-culture adequately describe the theoretical components of the constructs themselves but fall short of explaining how these techniques apply to the classroom environment. In each case, for example, the researchers prescribe intensive interpersonal interaction as the means whereby relational empathy leads to a third-culture. This, however, is often impractical in the classroom environment; many instructors do not have the opportunity to interact on an intimate and interpersonal level with each student. Yet, many instructors placed in multicultural settings still manage to create highly productive class cultures that emanate a milieu of security and stability while encouraging secular productivity. Is it possible, then, that instructors can achieve relational empathy with a group of students? Moreover, are these classroom environments third-cultures? Researchers need to generate more

information on this topic and define in greater detail the variables that influence relational empathy and third-cultures.

Currently, the field of multicultural communication education is still largely uncharted. Interestingly, however, the postulations of some multicultural theorists seem to merge and overlap in an almost contentious fashion regarding theoretical dogma; thus, the result is often the refining and/or renaming of already explored concepts or theories (e.g., Asuncion-Lande's term "transition shock" as a replacement for Oberg's "culture shock"). Moreover, many areas of interest are left relatively unstudied by multicultural communication researchers: "Still, little research and discussion has fully explored variations within racial groups" (Foeman, 1991, p. 256). Consequently, academic myopia becomes another hinderance to the expansion of multicultural communication education theory.

Like many physical scientists, social science researchers often pursue particular veins of interest within a given field throughout their academic careers; thus, fresh perspectives are constantly needed to revitalize the various fields of study. The verity and import of this statement is magnified in the field of multicultural communication education. The rapidly changing cultural complexion of the United States demands the construction of up to date and innovative educational methodologies. Multicultural communication education researchers, therefore, must strive to perform the duel roles of theorists and practitioners; that is, they must concern themselves with both the generation of theory and the invention of practical educational paradigms. Multicultural communication education theories, as with all theories, are only the arcane musings of social scientists unless attributed practical application.

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