

Intercultural Communication From an Interdisciplinary Perspective

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The need for effective communication among the people of the world has never been more pressing than it is at the start of the 21st century in this post-911 world. Recent breakthroughs in the fields of transportation, computing and telecommunications have combined to increase the ease and frequency of communication among members of different cultures. At the same time, developments in world politics have made the need for meaningful communication among different people a necessity for the survival of everyone on the planet. This paper describes a course that prepares students for global citizenship. The course helps students develop an informed understanding of global challenges and the skills to address those challenges. The paper offers specific teaching strategies and assignments that can be adapted to many disciplines.

Keywords: intercultural communication, global citizenship, mindfulness, international relations

Introduction

In order to be effective, global education must be integrated throughout the curriculum. It takes more than one or two courses on global issues to give students true preparation for their role as global citizens. This paper begins by describing an interdisciplinary course in global citizenship and goes on to suggest ways to adapt the assignments and teaching strategies presented across the disciplines.

Mindful Intercultural Communication

In the interdisciplinary course on global citizenship, we introduce students to a mindful approach to the study of intercultural communication. Mindful communicators approach information about other cultures with an open mind and break free of stereotypical categorizations of members of cultures that are different from their own. They also strive to see the world from different perspectives of other cultures. This approach can go a long way toward decreasing and even preventing unintentional conflict.

The importance of mindfulness in intercultural communication has been thoroughly discussed by Stella Ting-Toomey. In *Communicating Across Cultures*, she talked about the benefits of being a mindful intercultural communicator which include creating a feeling of “being understood, supported and respected” in the individual(s) with whom we are communicating (Ting-Toomey, 1999). Ting-Toomey’s work emphasized the need to go beyond our preconceived notions, to strive to gain knowledge about other cultures and to acquire skills for effective communication and conflict resolution (Ting-Toomey, 1999).

In our course, we define mindful intercultural communication as interactions with members of other

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cultures in which an individual strives to understand the cultural values, beliefs and norms of other parties and to use that understanding to adapt his/her communication style to achieve a meaningful exchange and a win-win result. In other words, rather than use one's own preferred style of communication, a mindful intercultural communicator will adapt to the style of the other individual, group or nation involved in the communication encounter. For example, if a US student is communicating with an international student from Japan, rather than begin a conversation abruptly, a common practice in the US, he/she will begin with a formal greeting since that would be the way the Japanese student would be used to starting a conversation.

Mindfulness is primarily a question of awareness. This is not necessarily a new discovery. Nowadays, in contemporary political science literature, it is very fashionable to advocate political "awareness" as a starting point for any political solution. If we are aware of the need to be sensitive to and respectful of the differences among cultures, we will be more likely to carry out the necessary steps to gain the knowledge required to communicate mindfully. Students in our course do not need to have extensive knowledge of other cultures to become mindful intercultural communicators; they just need an awareness of the importance of intercultural communication and an openness to new viewpoints.

Four Approaches to Intercultural Communication

In our course, we introduce students to the four approaches to studying intercultural communication and give them an understanding of how they can use these different approaches when developing projects to address global challenges at the local level.

The four primary approaches to the study of intercultural communication are: social science, interpretive, critical and dialectical. Since its early development, intercultural communication has been an interdisciplinary field. The various approaches to intercultural communication scholarship have their roots in the disciplines that helped shape the field. These disciplines are anthropology, linguistics and psychology. The influence of each of these fields can be seen in the way we study communication across cultures today.

The field of linguistics helps us understand the relationship between language and other cultural systems. The field of anthropology helps us recognize cultural patterns and realize the importance of nonverbal communication. The field of psychology brings to light the role of human cognition in understanding and categorizing the patterns of behavior of members of other cultures.

The Social Science Approach

The social science approach is based on the assumptions that human behavior is predictable and that there is a describable external reality. This approach, also called the functionalist approach, is based on research in the fields of sociology and psychology. Scholars seek to describe and predict behavior by using the social science approach, and they frequently rely on quantitative methods. These scholars believe that culture is a measurable variable, and that culture influences communication in much the same way as personality traits do. The goal of the social science approach is to predict how culture influences communication.

Scholars seek to study the way culture influences communication by using the social science approach. For example, a social science researcher might wish to examine the way members of different cultural groups use email, the Internet and other electronic media to communicate with members of them in groups to establish virtual communities. In such a study, they would be likely to isolate specific variables, like the topics covered on websites or the level formality of used in email messages.

The Interpretive Approach

Interpretive researchers are interested in describing human behaviors which they believe to be unpredictable and creative; they believe that culture is both created and perpetuated through the means of communication. The interpretive approach uses qualitative research methods that originated in the fields of anthropology and linguistics. These methods include field studies, ethnographies, observations and participant observations. Interpretive researchers typically become directly involved with members of the communities they are studying and often form close friendships with them. The interpretive approach studies culture from the perspective of members of the cultures being studied rather than through a framework imposed by the researcher.

Researchers using the interpretive approach are interested in describing culture, not in predicting behavior. They seek to find and describe patterns in communication and approach research in a holistic and subjective way. Interpretive researchers seek to answer questions related to what it means to be a member of a particular community and how participants in communities achieve “membering” (Philipsen, 1992). For example, when conducting her study of elderly Japanese people forming virtual communities online, Kanayama was interested in describing the behaviors of the elderly people and understanding how they interacted with one another when forming virtual communities. She found that self-disclosure through sharing stories and memories was an important part of achieving membering in the virtual community (Kanayama, 2003).

The Critical Approach

The critical approach views reality as subjective and focuses on the importance of studying the context in which communication occurs. Critical scholars view culture in terms of power struggles and study cultural differences specifically as they relate to unequal distribution of power within society. They are interested not only in studying human behavior across cultures, but also in effecting change in society. They believe that by their study and analysis of the role of power in cultural encounters, they can assist people in opposing the oppressive forces in society.

Critical scholars believe that the goal of intercultural research is to identify and make explicit power differences in order to liberate those individuals who lack power in society. In examining the role of communication in creating group identities, critical scholars wish to deconstruct assumptions about reality in order to challenge social realities that reinforce exploitation of some groups within society. In most nations, power is not distributed equally between the majority and minority cultures.

Scholars using the critical approach often conduct analyses of media and other aspects of popular culture. For example, while governments around the world advocate the necessity of computer skills in the global marketplace, the reality of public policies often serves to reinforce rather than eliminate inequalities (Clark, Demont-Heinrich, & Webber, 2004). Critical scholars Nakamura and Sterne (2000) have argued that computer practices actually perpetuate racial/ethnic inequalities and reinforce stereotypes. The digital divide can be studied from the perspective of larger social, economic and political issues that drive public policy decisions regarding technology. Critical scholars seek to find ways to understand these issues in order to help close the digital divide and take advantage of the potential of technology to create greater social equity.

The Dialectical Approach

The social science, critical and interpretive approaches to studying intercultural communication are all valuable. However, these approaches may seem to contradict with one another. In order to address the potential contradictions among these approaches, Martin, Nakayama, and Flores (2002) have developed the dialectical

approach to studying intercultural communication.

The dialectical approach acknowledges the value of the social science, critical and interpretive approaches, at the same time, it requires that we do not limit ourselves to the perspective provided by one of these approaches. The dialectical approach calls for the simultaneous acceptance of all three perspectives. An acceptance of multiple perspectives expands our perception of the world and allows us to create new categories and to see the complex potential of the study of intercultural communication.

Martin, Nakayama and Flores (2000) have identified six dialectics characteristic of intercultural communication: cultural-individual, personal-contextual, differences-similarities, static-dynamic, history/past-present/future and privilege-disadvantage. These dialectics all relate to four building blocks of intercultural communication: culture, communication, context and power.

Cultural-individual. This dialectic refers to the fact that communication is both cultural and individual. All people share some communication patterns with members of groups to which they belong. At the same time, all people also have unique individual communication patterns that are idiosyncratic.

Personal-contextual. This dialectic has to do with the relationship between the social roles that we play and how they interact with our communication patterns on the personal level. Social contexts often shape the behaviors of individuals. Roles related to our social position and our professional standing may influence our communication behavior. Some social roles require that we behave in a very formal manner. The way a lawyer in a courtroom or a scientist in a laboratory communicates will be a result of the context in which he/she is operating.

Differences-similarities. This dialectic recognizes the fact that people are simultaneously both similar to and different from one another in many ways. These similarities and differences exist both within and across cultures. There are real differences between the ways members of various cultures communicate; members of Arab cultures communicate more differently than members of Asian cultures. However, when we focus on differences among cultures we run the risk of stereotyping others.

Static-dynamic. This dialectic examines the fact that culture and communication patterns are both static and dynamic. Some cultural and communication patterns are relatively stable, while at the same time, cultures are evolving and changing. While cultures are influenced by the proliferation of new technologies, they will adapt these technologies to their cultural patterns and values. For example, a study by Lee (2000) found that email use in Korea was influenced by the Confucian dynamism cultural value dimension which emphasizes respect for elders and a strict adherence to social order. Most employees working in a virtual office environment in Korea did not use email to communicate with their superiors, because they felt it did not convey the appropriate level of respect to one's boss (Lee, 2000).

History/past-present/future. This dialectic refers to the need to be aware of both present conditions and historical influences as they affect intercultural communication. For example, it is not enough to understand the current situation of North African Muslims in France, which has the highest percentage of Muslims of any European nation. The unassimilated French Muslims are a major source of recruitment for Al-Qadea, which always searches for supporters among the alienated and poor Muslim communities around the world. To fully appreciate the current situation of the European Muslims (especially those in France), we must also have an understanding of how North African Muslim communities have developed in Europe and the factors that have shaped the interactions among these groups and their host countries.

Privilege-disadvantage. This dialectic addresses the contradiction that individuals may be simultaneously privileged and disadvantaged. Individuals may have power because of their social, economic or political status,

and may be privileged because of their position, just as others may be disadvantaged because of their lack of social, economic or political power.

However, an individual may have a privileged status in some contexts, but may also be disadvantaged in others. In some situations, an individual may simultaneously be privileged and disadvantaged. An international student in England may be privileged and disadvantaged at the same time. He/she may be privileged to have the opportunity to study abroad, but he/she may be simultaneously disadvantaged if he/she faces prejudice within the UK.

The dialectical approach brings together the strengths of the social science, critical and interpretive approaches to studying intercultural communication. It allows for a much broader perspective on the study of communication across national identities and prevents us from falling into dichotomies that tend to reduce rather than enlarge our views of other cultures. The dialectical approach makes it possible for us to address the many contradictory aspects of intercultural communication, and thereby, gives us a much richer experience of the study of culture and communication. It is a more challenging approach to take, because it does not offer simple answers, but rather requires that we examine issues from multiple perspectives and hold contradictory ideas simultaneously. However, by doing so, we will gain a holistic view of intercultural communication that fully recognizes its processual and relational nature.

Student Projects

While introducing students to mindfulness and the four approaches to the study of intercultural communication, we also have them read about and discuss current global issues (world hunger, the environment and world health). Students are then given an assignment requiring them to do further research on one global issue of their choice. When conducting their research they should seek out perspectives on their topic that encompass the various approaches to the study of intercultural communication. For example, a student researching the digital divide might seek out sources that discuss the privilege-disadvantage dialectic or a student studying global health might refer to interpretive research that examines how cultural beliefs influence health-related behaviors within a society.

Once the students have gained a fuller understanding of a particular topic, they will be tasked with the challenge of developing a small local project to address one aspect of that topic. For example, one student team in one of our classes addressed world hunger. The team wrote and designed a manual for a non-profit relief organization based in Fort Myers, Florida. The ECHO (Educational Concerns for Hunger Organization) combats hunger in 140 developing nations by distributing seeds and educational literature, and by advancing agricultural technology. The students wrote a manual describing seed plants that ECHO cultivates. ECHO provides the plants to its clients in developing nations. The students also translated their manual into Spanish and Creole, because they learned that these were the languages spoken by the majority of ECHO's clients. This project was particularly ambitious, as few of the other student teams actually translated their documents. However, this team included a foreign language major.

Rather than focusing on a specific global issue, student projects could instead be focused on creating greater understanding across cultures. For example, political science students interning at the ICCF (International Council of Central Florida) established a website to involve ordinary people in the local programs for dignitaries who visit central Florida via the US Department International Visitors Program. The ordinary citizens have an opportunity to host dinners or cultural events for the foreign dignitaries. The ordinary

citizens are thereby given a chance to interact with individuals who are usually way out of their league. The reviews of this program show extraordinary results for foreign guests, local hosts, and of course, the students who are present at all levels of activities.

Student projects like the ones described can be developed across the disciplines. Students in English, Digital Media and Information Technology programs can develop projects that share information about global issues in print manuals and websites. Students in the social sciences may develop research projects to gather more information on current attitudes and beliefs about global issues. Students in the sciences may develop projects that directly address global challenges, for example, they may work on solar energy or help develop environmentally-sound products.

Nursing students may present health-care information on websites targeted to audiences in other cultures who may have limited access to health-care professionals. There are ways to incorporate these assignments in nearly every discipline if the faculty members are creative in their approaches. The authors have found that such projects also work very well in interdisciplinary courses.

Guidelines for Faculty

We cannot do an effective job of preparing students for global citizenship by merely offering one or two courses or even a minor in global issues. To truly prepare students to become mindful global citizens, we must infuse global education throughout the curriculum. Students are most likely to develop a global perspective within their majors. Within their respective disciplines, faculty members can develop assignments and courses to help prepare students for the challenges of becoming mindful participants in our global community.

Here are some suggestions for faculty members who wish to develop assignments that challenge students to think globally:

- (1) Present information on intercultural communication in the context of the specific discipline (politics, economics, nursing, technical communication, history, biology, and so forth);
- (2) Give students example of large-scale projects to address global issues (Doctors without Borders, Peace Corps, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Habitat for Humanity) to stimulate their thinking about local solutions;
- (3) Encourage students to work in small groups to stimulate their creativity. This approach will work especially well in interdisciplinary courses or any course whose students are drawn from a variety of majors;
- (4) Encourage students to use new media (Adobe Connect, Blackboard and Skype) both to collaborate with fellow students and to disseminate their completed projects;
- (5) Even in courses that are not interdisciplinary, consider drawing on the expertise of colleagues across campus. For example, invite a communication faculty member to give a presentation on intercultural communication or a geography professor to lecture on environmental issues;
- (6) Draw on members of the local business community to present their perspectives on global issues;
- (7) Invite members of organizations like the Peace Corps or Habitat for Humanity to give a speech to the class.

Conclusion

Designing assignments to help students develop as mindful global citizens may appear challenging at first. Some faculty members may not feel comfortable introducing instruction in intercultural communication into their courses. However, most faculty members have dealt with global issues within their own fields; we urge all

faculty members to use their own experiences as a starting point and to draw on the experience and expertise of their colleagues to develop meaningful assignments for students. An interdisciplinary approach to global education will offer students valuable and much-needed preparation for their role as citizens in the 21st century.

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