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Teaching the Communication Course: Intercultural Communication

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Abstract: Intercultural Communication is a course that can help individuals gain the knowledge and tools to be an effective communicator in a globalized world. This article seeks to answer the question about what students enrolled in an Intercultural Communication course should learn. Specifically, the Intercultural Communication course is examined by highlighting its foundations, content areas, applied assignments, and issues to consider.

Globalization continues to change the way people work, learn, travel, build and maintain relationships, and live. To navigate these changes, individuals must learn to successfully communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds. Intercultural Communication is a course that can help individuals gain the knowledge and tools to be an effective communicator in a globalized world. This article will seek to answer the question about what students enrolled in an Intercultural Communication course should learn. Specifically, the Intercultural Communication course will be examined by detailing its foundations, content areas, applied assignments, and issues to consider.

Foundations

Before diving into theories and concepts specific to intercultural communication, instructors should begin by conceptualizing both communication and culture in the 21st century. Students enrolled in the Intercultural Communication course may not be Communication majors, so they should be introduced to what communication *is* and how *it works*. They also should be able to define and operationalize "culture" early in the semester and recognize intercultural communication as rooted in historical context

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and value systems. Once students have a basic understanding of communication and culture in a globalized world, they can begin to understand why the subject matter is important.

As part of their foundational study, students need to understand how culture relates to group identity. Making this connection will enable students to understand how ingroups and outgroups function in society, and how intercultural bias, prejudice, discrimination, and conflict exist. When having conversations connected to identity, students also can reflect on their own cultural identity, including ethnicity and race. Furthermore, students need to learn foundational principles related to how messages in intercultural settings are sent and received. For example, students should learn about nonverbal communication, verbal communication (i.e., linguistics), and how different cultures organize messages (i.e., code usage). Finally, students should learn how various interpersonal relationships can function across cultures, and they should examine intercultural communication across an array of social contexts in order to appreciate the applied nature of intercultural competence.

There are foundational theories, taxonomies, and models that should be included in an Intercultural Communication course, all of which come from both communication scholars and colleagues in other social science disciplines. To understand the basics of intercultural communication, students should be exposed to Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory (Hofstede, 1984; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010), Hall's (1976) high-context and low-context cultures, and Kluchhohn and Strodtbeck's (1961) Value Orientations. Students can gain a better understanding of cultural identity and group membership by learning about Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), Self-Categorization Theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), Intergroup Contact Theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998), and the Common Ingroup Identity Model (Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachman, & Rust, 1993). Theories related to culture and verbal and nonverbal communication include the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (Sapir, 1912, 1949; Whorf, 1956), Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles, Mulac, Bradac, & Johnson, 1987), and Face-Negotiation Theory (Ting-Toomey, 1988; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2003).

Content Areas

There are additional content areas that students should learn when taking an Intercultural Communication course. When teaching students about how communication works at a fundamental level, students should learn about the communication process, including the transactional model of communication, the goal of communication (i.e., shared meaning), and challenges to effective communication. When learning foundational principles about culture, students should consider the factors that make cultures unique, which includes values, beliefs, norms, and social practices. In addition, students should examine how co-cultures and subcultures create differences within cultural groups.

Students in an Intercultural Communication class also need to understand the imperatives for the subject matter. Therefore, they should learn about globalization, its history, and its critiques. Students should be exposed to topics such as changing demographics, migration, and technological advances as reasons for intercultural communication. As part of this exposure, students should recognize the way that social, political, and religious histories impact intercultural communication in the present day.

It also is important to discuss components of cultural identity including race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, social group, and religion, as these components may serve as a point of entry into examining cultural identity formation. By engaging diverse stories of identity formation (e.g., Nakayama,

2012; Nance & Foeman, 2002), students can begin to understand their own cultural context and how prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination develop within and between cultural groups.

When exploring nonverbal communication in intercultural contexts, students should study different types of nonverbal communication, how nonverbal communication is used, and the cultural variations in nonverbal behavior. For example, students might explore cultural differences in greetings and signs of respect. In addition, instructors should unpack elements of verbal communication such as learning a second language, translation, turn-taking in conversations, message organization, and linguistic relativity.

Finally, students should learn about cultural variations of interpersonal relationships. They should be exposed to examples of how the concepts of courtship, friendship, family, workplace relationships, and neighbors differ among cultures. Moreover, they should examine intercultural communication in various contexts such as the workplace, educational settings, popular culture, and travel.

Applied Assignments

Three assignments are particularly useful when teaching the aforementioned foundations and content areas. Near the beginning of the semester, when students are learning the basics of intercultural communication, they should conduct an intercultural identity inventory. Many students come into the course taking their cultural identity for granted, so this assignment allows them to stop and reflect on how their identity is shaped by culture. This in-class activity asks students to first individually answer a set of questions about their regular behaviors (e.g., they are asked about their normal practices related to eating, spending money, volunteering, greetings, and politics). Once they have answered the questions, they then are asked to reflect on which elements of these behaviors are particularly important to them, their families, and the culture at large. Students then share their findings with a partner. After a few minutes of sharing with partners, a discussion ensues with the rest of the class and students making connections between their daily activities and cultural identity.

When students are studying code usage and how cultures can view evidence and persuasive messages differently, they are asked to write a persuasive speech using different modes of evidence. In small groups, students are randomly assigned a persuasive topic and a country/culture. Groups then are tasked with determining how someone from that culture might make an effective persuasive argument. After students organize their argument, they either give the speech or explain to the class why they organized their speech the way they did.

Each semester, students complete an intercultural communication consultation assignment. For this semester-long assignment, students provide a mock consultation presentation to classmates who are pretending they are about to visit a new culture. Students pick a culture new to them early in the semester and then conduct academic research on that culture. They then must write an analysis and overview of their findings, which then will inform their consultation presentation. During the presentation, which occurs at the end of the semester, students give an 8–10-minute speech that provides an overview of the culture, in-depth information on two to three intercultural concepts within that culture, and tangible advice to their classmates who are about to "visit" that particular place.

Issues to Consider

As with any course, there are certain challenges and issues to consider specific to the subject matter. First, it is helpful if students have a basic understanding of communication theory and concepts prior to taking the class. Although this content is introduced in the first few days of the course, a background in communication courses helps students better apply theory/concepts to intercultural contexts. Second, it can be a challenge to explain globalization and its effects in a political climate that argues over—and sometimes against—the tenets of globalization. Students need to learn that globalization is a reality, regardless of their political and economic beliefs and values. Third, it can be a challenge to teach students about racism and prejudice, especially if they are students of privilege who have not faced much discrimination. That said, conversations about privilege and prejudice are essential to learning about intercultural communication, so instructors need to focus on setting rules for discussion, de-escalating conflict, and demonstrating listening. Fourth, gaining access to multiple voices and viewpoints as guest speakers can be a challenge due to time and monetary constraints. Therefore, it is imperative to find additional ways to get "guest speakers" from diverse backgrounds in the classroom through mediums such as TED Talks and documentaries.

Conclusion

Intercultural Communication is a course that is vital in the 21st century. For students to succeed in a globalized world, they need the content in this course. Intercultural Communication will give them knowledge and tools to navigate the workplace, the university, travel, and relationships. This course also will help them understand why issues such as prejudice and discrimination exist in the world, and can provide clarity to why conflict between groups of people exists. Students who take the course seriously will learn valuable information that will help make them better neighbors and global citizens.

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