

An American Professor's Perspective on the Dialectics of Teaching Interpersonal Communication in the Swedish Classroom

Elizabeth J. Natalie

University of North Carolina at Greensboro

This case study of an American professor's teaching experience in Sweden analyzes classroom communication using relational dialectics theory and cultural values theory. Tensions of hierarchy vs. equality and autonomy vs. connection were described through classroom processes such as greeting practices, dress, grading, attendance, gendered language use, and participation. Three Swedish values served as partial explanation for the communication processes described in this essay: *folkhemmet* (i.e., "the good home"), *lagom* (i.e., "moderation"), and *ensamhet* (i.e., "solitude"). Results of this interpretive research suggest that professors preparing for teaching abroad would benefit from the use of relational theories, cultural values, and metaphors to assist in competent professional interaction and successful learning outcomes.

Teacher preparation increasingly includes training in multicultural perspectives (Mushi, 2004), diversity within one's own culture (O'Malley, Hoyt, & Slattery, 2009), and the concept of global-mindedness (Zahn, Sandell, & Lindsay, 2007); however, such training does not necessarily prepare the teacher for a teaching abroad experience. Most teachers do develop careers within their own culture so that such intercultural training is used at home rather than abroad. In this essay, I explore my personal experience as a seasoned college professor teaching in Sweden in order to make the case that teacher education broaden its own boundaries to meet the needs of those participating in teacher exchange.

American university professors are teaching abroad in larger numbers than ever before. The Fulbright Scholar Program (Council for International Exchange of Scholars, 2010) alone sends over 800 American scholars abroad every year, and the proliferation of study abroad programs in colleges and universities across the United States includes opportunities for professors to teach. How does one prepare for such a unique experience? As sojourners living and working in a country for a semester or a full academic year, most people gather cultural knowledge before they go through reading, talking to people in the host culture, and practicing language skills. Sometimes there are pre-departure orientation programs, but these are generally designed for successful, large scale exchanges such as the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program, where over 100 teachers a year from the US go to Japan to teach English. Communication professors have the distinct advantage of a literature on intercultural communication from which to draw advice on cultural adaptation (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003; Kim, 2001) and competence (Lustig & Koester, 2003; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005). However, there is little research on the professor's experience and point of view derived from the intercultural teaching experience itself. There is no systematic look at the complexity of going into a

classroom that is outside the expectations of the professor's normal teaching routine and primary language skills.

Because I am an American communication studies professional, I frame and interpret my Swedish experience through communication theory as it relates to some larger cultural values that are integral to Swedish society. My purpose is to demonstrate that a teacher's understanding of the cultural dynamics at work is equally important to the success of the teaching-learning process as the students' achievement of the course learning outcomes. A secondary goal is to add to the teacher education literature an under-documented perspective on international exchange. Teaching abroad is an important way for educators to contribute to global understanding, to foster professional relationships, and to exchange pedagogical practices and knowledge.

Since 1995, I have traveled on a regular basis to the Nordic countries (Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, but not Iceland) to teach, consult, and conduct research. I am the director of an intercultural communication bilateral exchange program that my university has with a similar-sized university in southeastern Sweden. This exchange includes teaching, and I have lectured and taught in Sweden many times. The research on which this essay is composed includes all my experience in Sweden, but it creates a case based on a three-week course in interpersonal communication I taught to Information Systems (IS) majors. IS majors are part of a media and communication program and elected to take the interpersonal communication course as a choice among several in communication studies.

As I sought to make sense of my teaching experience in Sweden, I developed a research question based on how I would probably encounter the mindset of my students. As cultural value systems came into negotiation with each other, I knew that such a negotiation would be at the center of my learning process as a teacher. I also knew that the

communication itself held the key to discovering, describing, and interpreting the lessons to be learned in such an intercultural experience. The fundamental research questions pursued in the study are: What communication dialectics manifest in the Swedish classroom, and how does knowledge of those manifestations inform an international professor's ability to teach competently? Implicit in these questions is the assumption that competent intercultural communication itself coupled with teaching technique will assist a teacher to move toward Ting-Toomey and Chung's (2005) notion of *conscious competence* where one "is committed to integrating the new knowledge, attitude, and skills into competent practice" (p. 19). The case study proceeds in four parts: a literature review and methodological framework; the manifestations of communication dialectics found in the classroom; an analysis of the dialectics in relation to Swedish cultural values; and a final reflection on the meaning and lessons learned that could be used to develop future training programs for university and college professors who teach abroad.

Literature Review

Classroom Teaching in Intercultural Contexts

Communication research involving a teacher's success in an intercultural setting is largely based on empirical studies involving teachers and students from one culture being compared on a construct or behavior with teachers and students from another culture. Sallinen-Kuparinen's (1992) research on teacher communicator style fits this comparative model. In the majority of studies, students are rating teachers (e.g., Roach, Cornett-DeVito, & DeVito, 2005) rather than teachers reporting their own experiences. Teacher immediacy behaviors have been studied the most. For example, Johnson and Miller (2002) conducted a cross-cultural comparison of teacher immediacy and students' perceptions of learning in the US and Kenya and found positive correlations in both cultures. Comparative analyses in general are an excellent way to learn where cultural values and practices converge and diverge; knowledge of the studies cited above might benefit exchange professors traveling in various directions.

More studies have been done to date on the communication behavior of teachers in the Chinese classroom. Qin Zhang (2005, 2006) has examined a number of behaviors including immediacy, teacher clarity (Zhang & Zhang, 2005), and teacher emotional labor (Zhang & Zhu, 2008). A study conducted by Lu (1997) found that Chinese teachers use more punishment-oriented behavior alteration techniques to gain student compliance. This reflection of Chinese cultural values for authority, morality, and modeling is

highly useful for American teachers going to China or for understanding Chinese students and their expectations in the American classroom. Given the explosion of exchange students between China and the US, and the number of study abroad opportunities that could accommodate faculty exchange, it is no wonder that interest in cross-cultural comparisons is so intense.

Studies such as those just described are highly useful, to be sure, but there really is little else from American college or university professors who might interpret their own experiences in some way that will be useful for those planning to go abroad. One such study that does set the stage for others to follow is Festervand and Kyle's (2001) case study on teaching graduate economics in France. They discovered that differences in academic culture, student conduct, language, and pedagogical technique do impact the teacher's success. Since pre-departure orientation programs are not consistent for faculty, especially those going on short-term exchanges, a growing literature on faculty experience could be very useful to teacher training as a whole.

Dialectical Theory

A Western view of dialectics is based in the work of Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), and more to the immediate case, Leslie Baxter and Barbara Montgomery's (1996) theory of relational dialectics that derives from Bakhtin's (1981) social construction approach to dialogue/communication. Relational dialectics is a common approach in the field of communication to understanding interpersonal relationships. Baxter (1990) outlines the basic internal tensions in a relationship to be connection—autonomy, certainty—uncertainty, and openness—closedness. The tensions manifest in all types of relationships and indicate that relational partners want *both* connection to their partner *and* individual autonomy; partners want *both* a degree of predictability about their partners *and* a degree of novelty; partners expect *both* disclosure between each other *and* a degree of privacy. These tensions of space, knowledge and talk, and others defined in the relational dialectics literature (Rawlins, 1992) reflect the dialectical view that "social life is a dynamic knot of contradictions, a *ceaseless interplay* between contrary or opposing tendencies" (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 3) such as those just described. As communicators express themselves in relationship to each other, their interpersonal communication engages the tensions that exist to find some kind of balance so that both ends of the tension co-exist in the messy existence that defines any relationship.

Relational dialectics theory is appropriate for intercultural relationships as partners seek to negotiate tensions that come from differences and similarities in

their cultural backgrounds. This theory has been successfully applied to the analysis of cross-cultural marriages in Finland (Cools, 2006); the present study extends the application to the student-teacher relationship in Sweden. Two sets of dialectical contradictions were apparent in my experience: hierarchy—equality and autonomy—connection. These will be discussed in detail later.

Cultural Values Theory

Relational dialectics are embedded in cross-cultural value systems that have both similarities and differences that come into tension with each other. In trying to understand why a tension may play out as it does, the answer may lie in the unconscious application of values to the relational situation. Cultural values theories derive from Hall and Hall's (1990) fifty years of anthropological research, much of it capsulized in his book *Understanding Cultural Differences*. For the present case, the work of Hofstede (2001) and House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, and Gupta (2004) and the ongoing World Values Survey are the derivatives that provide useful insights into a comparison of Sweden and the United States. Hofstede's (2001) global study yielded four dimensions of value: individualism—collectivism; high power—low power; masculinity—femininity; and low uncertainty avoidance—high uncertainty avoidance.

Extending from Hofstede's (2001) work, House et al. (2004) developed the Global Leadership and Organizational Effectiveness (GLOBE) study that looked at nine cultural dimensions. Holmberg and Akerblom (2007) wrote the in-depth results of the GLOBE work in Sweden and found the following three cultural themes at work: consensus as a work style (linked to low power distances and equality); the use of rationality and pragmatism as strategies to cope with uncertainty (linked to reliance on rules and personal responsibility); and individuals who had concern for both self and the social good (private individualism balanced with public collectivism).

American and Swedish value systems do have similarities, such as the value for high levels of individualism; however, Swedish individualism is horizontal, emphasizing personal development and responsibility, while American individualism is vertical and emphasizes competition with others (Hofstede, 2001). Both Sweden and the United States have low uncertainty avoidance, that is, each takes risks and deals well with uncertain situations; however, Swedes tend to be more rule oriented and less willing to engage conflict while Americans bend rules and engage conflict more directly. In contrast, Americans rank higher on masculinity and power distance than Swedes.

The World Values Survey (see www.worldvaluessurvey.org) is an ongoing measure of

sociocultural change based on two major dimensions: traditional versus secular-rational values and survival versus self expression values. When countries are mapped (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005, 2010), Sweden ranks right at the top of both the secular-rational and the self-expression values. The United States, by contrast is more traditional in its values, especially religiosity and national pride, even though Americans value self-expression almost as much as Swedes.

Appropriate to the culture in which the relationship is developing, this study focuses on three interrelated Swedish values and beliefs that are part of "deep-level culture" (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005) that help to explain Swedish everyday thinking and behavior: *lagom*, *folkhemmet*, and *ensamhet*. As Ting-Toomey and Chung (2005) explain, shared beliefs reflect the cultural worldview and reveal motivational bases for behavior. The Swedish model of social welfare is the overarching historical development of political, economic, and social democracy that guides modern Swedish life (Pettersson, 2008). Sweden is considered one of the highest rated countries in the world for democracy, anti-corruption, economic stability, and small class gaps. Linked to this model are the cognitive metaphors of *lagom* (i.e., "moderation"), *folkhemmet* (i.e., "the good home"), and *ensamhet* (i.e., "solitude"). These concepts will be explained in more detail in the analysis section to follow.

Method

Case Context

Case situations offer valuable real-life experience where salient issues or problems can be identified for analysis and recommendations made for similar situations (McTavish & Loether, 2002). A case allows a detailed look at one particular situation so that insight and knowledge can be interpreted within appropriate theory. In this method, cases often serve as a site for creating strategies that help oneself and others to communicate more competently in the future. I taught a three-week winter course in interpersonal communication as an elective for Information Systems (IS) majors at my university's exchange site in Sweden. Going into the experience had a relative degree of comfort for me because the course was taught in English, I had lectured or conducted workshops for students at least six times prior, and I knew the faculty involved in the related communication programs that make up the Social Science Department where IS is housed. As the American colleague who helped to craft our intercultural communication exchange with this institution in Sweden, I spent time on this campus at least five times in connection with our exchange program before teaching the three-week course. Thus,

this field site allowed me to gain access, build rapport, and ask questions comfortably—all necessary for successful case research (McTavish & Loether, 2002).

The three-week course was an ideal situation to use for the purposes of interpreting the classroom experience as patterned communication. Classroom teaching is embedded in cultural values and the relational process of teaching and learning among participants. In this course, I had the luxury of extended contact with students and faculty rather than the usual one-shot lecture or workshop. As a faculty member responsible for an entire course, I knew that a deeper set of observations could be made to study the emergent communication between Swedish students and me. This course also had no Americans enrolled so that the Swedish behavior observed was more pure than a class designed for international students from a variety of countries.

Research Process and Data Collection

Taking on the role of a participant-observer, I approached the situation as one that required a systematic interpretation of meaning from all that I could observe. I wrote detailed notes each evening after my class meetings in which I recorded both group and individual behavior of students and myself; there were a total of seven sets of notes corresponding to the seven class meetings in the course. These notes lasted several pages, single-spaced for each entry, and included details of behavior, the context, emotion that could be detected, the tone of interaction, and an interpretation of the whole meeting (Anderson, 1987). I kept a log of participation, grades, and attendance; I collected sample assignments and e-mail correspondence; I administered a four-question reflection on the last day of class; and I made other notes of my interaction with students outside the classroom and at the university in general. I supplemented these materials with notes that I have taken on all my trips to this university both before and after the teaching experience. I keep a daily diary whenever I travel to Sweden in which I record experiences, cultural situations, conversations, meals, etc. I had regular and in-depth conversations with my two host colleagues from the Media and Communication Program, Annika and Erik (pseudonyms; I have changed all names of colleagues and students to ensure the privacy of the individual), in which we discussed pedagogical practice and student expectations. I made notes of those conversations as soon after as possible where I recorded what we talked about. After my teaching assignment was over, I continued a brief correspondence with Annika to follow up on the examination for the course, and I sent copies of an early draft of this manuscript to three Swedish colleagues for comment, including Annika, Erik, and

the professor who exchanged places with me and taught my students while I was in Sweden. I have subsequently visited the university after this teaching exchange and lectured twice.

Data Analysis

Upon returning from the teaching experience, I carefully reviewed all the material collected and looked for patterns, practices, meanings, roles, relationships, and process (Lofland & Lofland, 1984; McTavish & Loether, 2002). I then linked my interpretation of the experience to theory as I tried to describe and understand the social experience in this particular case. The following discussion explicates the analysis.

Communication Dialectics in the Swedish Classroom

Hierarchy Versus Equality

The relational dialectic of hierarchy versus equality is a classroom version of the well-documented structural tension of complementarity or symmetry (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967) in dyadic relationships. Partners are either complementary, structuring the dyad vertically in a power relationship that emphasizes differences, or, partners are symmetrical where power is more equal and similarities are emphasized. Pedagogical models in Europe still tend to be more authoritative and are characterized by lectures, less interaction between students and professor, and the assumption that teachers hold tacit authority in their professional role, thus setting up a power differential in the classroom. The United States has experimented more with symmetrical models using the idea of a learning community where teachers and students are all learning together in a shared experience where authority is based on legitimate knowledge. Sweden's educational system does still have elements of authority in spite of the fact that a deep cultural value is the equality of all citizens. In fact, Sweden is known the world over for a policy of gender equality (Inglehart, Norris, & Welzel, 2003) that permeates much of social and political practice from family leave to parliamentary representation. In the case presented here, the tension between hierarchy and equality manifested in three aspects of the Swedish classroom: student-teacher interpersonal communication, expressions of language and gender, and grading expectations.

Student-teacher relationships. Swedes, in general, do not use titles or other forms of authority to designate a person's social or work position. When meeting someone new it is customary to shake hands and say your first and last name as a form of

introduction. The dyad usually proceeds on a first name basis after that. One may be unaware of the rank or structural position of the next person, and it is common at this university to have lunch with the president of the university and greet him on a first name basis. His office is on a hallway that has no barriers, and his office door is often open to passers-by. Swedes do not stand on ceremony. Professors are on a first name basis with their students. Everyone dresses casually most of the time, meaning a black turtleneck, jeans, and boots as a daily uniform during the winter season. It is hard to distinguish teachers from students because everyone looks the same at first glance.

My experience as a guest professor prior to the three-week course consisted of lectures and workshops using an interactive model with students in the Intercultural Studies Programme, which is taught in English. With about 75 students, half from international exchange partners around the world, I was used to comparative analysis and many points of view when guest lecturing. However, the Information Systems (IS) majors in this class were mostly Swedish, and they were used to not speaking in class. Their instruction was more authoritative lecture from older, male professors with little in-class activity or formal homework. It was actually a culture shock to them when I taught using the more symmetrical activities, discussion, and Q & A that is typical of an American model.

Before I arrived, there was some anticipation of the “American professooooor,” as my host colleague, Annika, wrote in an e-mail. On the first day, she introduced me as Dr. X, but I made a concerted effort to go by my nickname (J___ for the purposes of anonymity). The students were unsure at times, but most called me by J___ in class. The ambiguity showed up in an e-mail from a student sending in a late assignment:

Hi J___ (don't know how formal you want your students to be?) ☺ Here is my assignment . . . sorry I'm late with it☺. Greetings: Markus. P.S. I think you are doing a great job here . . . love your part of the course!!!

By the end of the three weeks, I was no longer taken off guard when my students said, “Hi, J___” in the hallway. The use of first names to promote equality implies restraint on the exercise of authority and reduces hierarchy. In the United States, I use my title for two reasons: to maintain distance as a sign of authority and to promote gender equality. I am a short, slight woman who looks somewhat young. In our culture of inequality, I am frequently not given the same consideration as my male colleagues, and students have challenged me over the years in a disrespectful

manner. In a culture like Sweden, where personal equality is presupposed, first names are a much more comfortable approach. I did not detect disrespect for myself or my position as the professor while in the classroom. More important was my style as an American—I was viewed as “jazzy” and very enthusiastic, according to the students.

I had the students make name cards for themselves and place them in front of their workspace at the table for the duration of the course. The Swedish students were surprised and somewhat impressed with my willingness to learn 38 names and to be personal, especially given there were 27 men in the class and many had the same name (e.g., three students named Daniel). The pronunciation of Swedish names is sometimes difficult, but I wanted to show respect and attention to all of them as I would to students in an interpersonal course in the United States. As I discussed this technique of nameplates with Annika and Erik, they wondered if I might not be trying too hard. They jokingly said they couldn't even remember all their students' names. Equality in Sweden is more akin to anonymity in the classroom. Most students really were not used to being called by name in class, and some were embarrassed to be recognized as an individual. For me, I went against the cultural grain because I thought it was important for the subject matter, but I made the effort to respect each student's preference as I understood those preferences. Interestingly, the dialectical tension of authority versus equality affected me and the students—I tried to decrease the authority, and they questioned how much to defer to authority. We seemed to meet each other somewhere toward the equality side of the contradiction, which is entirely appropriate given the nature of the course material.

Expressions of language and gender. Naming aside, language use in English presented confusion for students regarding equality and authority. On the first day of class, a male student simply exclaimed, “Shit!” as a response to a topic we were discussing. When I asked for an example of role behavior between mother and son, Jesper responded, “If someone disses your mother, you kick their ass.” I asked the class if cursing in front of the teacher was okay. A woman in the class shook her head “No,” but some of the men said it was just American slang and not meant as offensive. I laughed and said, “Okay.” Jesper apologized after class, and the cursing stopped. In my initial interpretation, it did not occur to me that the cursing was designed to impress me and demonstrate knowledge of English language skill; I took the cursing as a male test of my authority because decorum precludes cursing in the typical Swedish classroom.

On the first day of class it was easy to see that there were some gender differences among the students. Of 38 students in this class, only 11 were women.

Information Systems is still a male-dominated major. To a person, the women sat in pairs, except Anna, who sat next to her boyfriend. By the second class period there was a lot of sexual innuendo coming from the men during our class discussions. By the fifth class period, it was overt, and it seemed to be escalating. I asked the women in the class if they would like to have lunch together so I could ask them about gender issues (they knew it was my research area), and they all agreed. At lunch, I expressed dismay over the male dominance in the class. Nina said, “Oh, we’re used to it. And it’s the same guys in every class.” As we continued our cordial lunch in the cafeteria, the women turned out to be shy (as I interpreted their behavior) about gender issues in general and they seemed quite ignorant of feminism as both an academic and a political concept. For the women in the class, gender inequality didn’t seem to be an issue, or at least they didn’t voice concern. What I witnessed in the classroom and what the students participated in as practice was much closer to an American display of explicit sexual behavior, but it created tension for both the students and for me. This situation left me wondering if gender equality was more of an ideological construct than verbal behavior. The tension was never worked out and it left me uncomfortable throughout the experience.

Grading expectations. In Sweden, students are expected to achieve, but not overachieve. At the university, students take exams with a pass/fail grading system. To pass is the expectation, although to pass with distinction is possible. Honors courses, advanced placement, accelerated classrooms, or other American notions of academic achievement and hierarchy are practically unheard of in Sweden. Although the standards of achievement in Sweden and the United States both include a 99% literacy rate (Central Intelligence Agency, 2012), most Swedes are bi- or trilingual.

There were four assignments during the course: two from in-class activities and two from take-home assignments. Of the 152 papers that should have come in, 123 were received. Of the 123 assignments turned in, eleven of those were late. I used a check system (✓) to grade in keeping with their pass/fail system. The students asked me about this when I passed back their first assignment, so I explained check-plus is very good, check is good, and check-minus is needs improvement. It wasn’t until the fifth class period that I was told that a check looks like the sign for “fail” in Swedish! They didn’t have the heart to ask me to find another notation system, so I clarified the system again. Out of the 123 assignments I graded, 26 received a check-plus, three received a check-minus, and the rest (i.e., 94) received checks. In my own interpersonal classes in the US, students are always competing for a check-plus on their in-class activity cards, and they make sure their friends

know they received one when it happens. The significance of a check and grades in general are more important to my American students.

When I gave the first homework assignment (a two-page essay to write over the weekend), many questions were asked about the format and grading. Annika and I compared grading systems to be sure my check system was appropriate. In Sweden, grades are basically good, very good, and fail—this equated with the check system, so there seemed to be a match. I asked how many students were motivated to perform in the very good category. Most said they’re not because good is just fine. After that class discussion, a female student approached me and said, “Some of us would like to earn very good grades.” She turned out to be very conscientious and earned a check-plus on three out of the four assignments. Only one other student outperformed her. But, it was all done quietly and without fanfare; in fact, she never spoke out in class discussion.

The model in Sweden is to take courses sequentially, that is, students attend one course and have an exam over the entire course content, then go to the next course. If a student fails an exam there is an opportunity for a re-write. At the end of my time in Sweden, I left four essay exam questions. The exam questions were modified by Annika and another instructor in the media and communication program. Annika reported in an e-mail,

Some students made very good essays and some made as what has been very normal in this group—a somewhat poor presentation. (They didn’t write as much or deep as one could wish.) But as a whole they performed rather well, even though two of them had to refine their essay a bit to pass.

All the students passed. Annika’s report implies a basic performance that was equal across the board. Were I to ask an American colleague to report on the performance of students, I predict the response would have been a complete breakdown by grades: X number of As, etc. In Sweden, it was just fine that everyone passed, and Annika did not elaborate on anyone who may have passed with distinction. This manifestation of equality actually took the pressure off me to fall within the hierarchically acceptable range of grades that is expected in the American classroom. In fact, no one started the course off in Sweden with that old refrain, “I need an A in this class,” which is so typical in the United States.

Autonomy Versus Connection

Baxter (1990) argues that the dialectical contradiction of autonomy versus connection is the

most pervasive tension in all interpersonal relationships. In a dyad, two people in relationship, we seek to be connected as a matter of definition; however, we seek to be autonomous individuals as well. In the teaching-learning relationship, the professor seeks connection in a course on interpersonal communication because the concept is at the center of the knowledge base. By taking the body of literature on interpersonal communication and sharing contextual experiences, all the learners better understand the material. Like Americans, Swedes rank high on individualism, and the educational system is set up to emphasize personal responsibility. The student is responsible for his or her own progress. This is a very different mindset from the parental approach that seems to characterize American higher education today where teachers oversee student progress in minute detail. The tension in Sweden manifested in attendance and the students willingness to participate in class activities and assignments.

Attendance. There are no real attendance policies in the Swedish university. The expectation is that people come to class, arrive on time, and participate as appropriate. If a person doesn't come to class, then he or she is responsible for the material. On the surface, that sounds the same as many American attendance expectations. At my home university, a student can fail or be dropped from a course for not attending class on a regular basis, both as university policy and as a professor's individual policy. The Communication Studies Department has attendance policies that generally require the student's presence and professors penalize for absence. The policy rationale has to do with pedagogy: we teach communication concepts through student participation. Activity-based classrooms allow students to perform or practice communication skills and concepts.

The attitude toward attendance in Sweden was much more casual, and students were more autonomous in their decisions to attend class. There were seven class sessions with sixteen hours of actual class time, including five 2-hour "lectures," and two 3-hour lectures. (Note that the word "lecture" is the official notation on the schedule, but that would be equivalent to what we would call a "class period.") For me, every minute counted, but for them, just having the intercultural experience was important. For the 38 students in the class, attendance was not as important. Eleven people were absent from the second Friday class. Seven students were absent three or more times. Two students went on winter vacation (France and the Canary Islands) and missed the last three class periods. In the e-mail exchange with the student who went to the Canary Islands, it is clear that Tobias makes the decision to disconnect, while I am asking for connection through humor:

Hi J___!

I attached my homework assignment to this mail because I can't come to anymore of your classes. I'm going to Tenerife on Friday for a week. I hope that you will put out some great notes from the classes I gonna miss on the website so I can read them from there. That would be GREAT☺

Tobias

Tobias,

How can you do this to me?! What's more important in Tenerife? Where IS Tenerife? Annika will have your assignments, so go to her to pick it up upon your return. I have handouts on Friday, so I will put those with your assignments so you have a set. And think of this, you are going to miss the class photo!

J___

Hi

Tenerife is an island in the Canary Islands outside northwest Africa. It belongs to Spain.

Tobias

When I asked Annika about students randomly going on vacation, she indicated that it was more and more common. It just wasn't a priority to attend classes when a winter break on a sunny island was needed to cure the blahs. In the student's mind, it is better to balance the need for physical and psychological respite over duty to continue slogging through the snow to attend class. In a geographical place that spends much of the time in darkness from October to March, it is easy to see how autonomy manifests itself in a person's decision to balance obligations to mind, body, and climate. When I found out my class overlapped another class, it was even more understandable that wanting to connect was out of kilter for some of them, and they solved the problem by not attending every class.

The other insightful e-mail exchange on this topic happened between me and Henrik, where he perceives that I don't know Swedish ways:

Hi,

I will not be attending class tomorrow due to a moved dentist appointment. This is really strange to mail a teacher and tell him/her that you are not coming and why. At Swedish universities classes, or rather lectures, are rarely mandatory. It's the student's loss if he/she doesn't attend. Since you don't seem to know the Swedish system all that well, I thought I'd mail you. Have a pleasant day.

Regards, Henrik

Hi Henrik,

Thanks for your note, it is a nice courtesy to your teacher. I know the Swedish system. The reason I make a big deal about coming to class is because of the topic: communication. The main instructional technique is to get you involved and participating as students so that you actually learn by communicating. When students don't come to class, I get disappointed. I understand it is the student's loss. I also understand that things like the dentist are part of everyday living. We had fun today, so I hope to see you for the last class on Wednesday. Again, thanks for writing me. I appreciate your thoughtfulness.

J___

Class participation. Eight students attended every class period, including one student, Emma, who volunteered to design and maintain a website for our class. Another student, who was from Kosovo but had adopted the nickname Tony (this is his actual nickname – I have maintained it here to preserve the joke), appointed himself my personal “bodyguard” (Annika’s joke) and accompanied me to and from class and office. He carried a box of photocopied readings, collected the money for photocopying, and generally asked me what I needed. I actually saw Tony as our class accountant, but we made some good *Sopranos* jokes after Annika named his role. Tony enjoyed participating and joking in class. Both Tony and Emma were extremely helpful students, and both were quite connected to me and the learning experience.

Eighteen students regularly participated with contributions in discussion and made class jokes. That’s half the class participating on a regular basis where English was the second language. In American classes, very often only a handful of students participate regularly and sometimes less than that. In Sweden, it was easy to elicit responses. One day a student said it was such a nice change to be in a communication class where the students could participate rather than sit in three-hour lectures with an “old-guy professor.” They really enjoyed the action. This level of connection, however, was not normal; rather, the novelty of participation was more likely at work in this situation.

Some misunderstanding on my part set up barriers to my expectation that students stay completely connected to the course. In preparing the materials for Sweden, I was told to give students about 250 pages a week to read. I selected DeVito’s (2009) *The Interpersonal Communication Book* (2009) and seven additional articles. Students purchased these materials, and they turned out to be expensive—I did not know about the textbook market in Europe. Some students delayed buying the text until they had money, thus resulting in a disconnect in class lecture.

A two-page essay over a weekend created problems for several students. At least three wrote disrespectful e-mails to me, and several complained to Annika (e.g., title of one student essay: “Homework Over My Weekend”). Everything became a bit more clear with Helena’s postscript to her short and not very good essay (note the writing stands as she composed it):

I don’t know if I had understand the task correctly. I also think it was very bad of you to give us this task with so little time. I had to work all weekend so I haven’t spent much time on this task. It took a lot of time to read in the book, I didn’t get money until Friday, so I haven’t got the chance to read before. . . . So you want get any better than this. . . . It was that you nearly got it in Swedish so I hope you understand there was little time for me to do this task. . . .

Several of my assumptions about Swedish students and their lives were wrong. First, the time required for them to read and comprehend English was more than I thought. My mistake came from assuming that because their oral English skills were so good that their reading and writing skills would be equal. Second, many more students now work part-time or fulltime jobs. Only recently most students did not work while at university, but the economy has changed. I hadn’t planned for students like Helena to struggle. I gave her the opportunity to re-write her paper, but she took the check-minus. On reflection, I did not assign readings or this written assignment in moderation in regard to quantity and time needed for completion. As I discussed the complaints with Annika, it was mentioned that Swedish students are more vocal these days in their general complaints—another surprise to me. Their assertiveness goes against the polite, silent Swede stereotype that I had experienced in short term teaching assignments.

Student Reflections

The Swedish students were not completely surprised by American teaching style, but they confronted tensions as much as I did. We used comparative analysis as a primary technique to learn interpersonal concepts, and the students overwhelmingly told me they liked this way of learning. They wrote reflections based on three questions about their learning and having an international teacher. All but one reflection was positive. One can see the challenges of hierarchy versus equality and autonomy versus connection in their comments:

- “You are an active teacher who sometimes got me to feel embarrassed and guilty if I haven’t read what we were supposed to do for the class. That is a good thing!”

- “There has been a lot of interaction, we have been invited to participate in the lessons which has increased the learning.”
- “In Sweden teachers has more of a monolog, you are using a dialog.”
- “Your style is more personal. I mean you learned our names and so on that makes us more important and makes us not wanna miss anything.”
- “Teaching style pretty much different [than Swedish], more connecting and involving, pushing forward.”
- “I think this course has been very interesting and it’s fun when the teacher is so engaged in the class. I don’t feel so anonymous like I do in other courses.”

These comments indicated that the pedagogy challenged the Swedish students in regard to the status quo. They had to concentrate in another language and account for cultural differences—the two most frequently discussed topics on their reflections. In doing so, the students were able to reflect on themselves and their own culture. Note that I had the advantage here in regard to teaching competence—the course was taught in English, and I utilized American materials and approaches to interpersonal communication.

Dialectics and Cultural Values

How might the dialectical behavior be explained to reflect the deeper culture? Although the Swedish students were speaking English, there is no reason to believe their motivation for behavior was necessarily linked to the mindset that frames the professor’s thinking and language use. Rather, it makes sense to look for the connection between the dialectics present and the larger cultural values framing the situation. Three Swedish values serve as partial explanation for the communication processes in the classroom experience described in this essay: *folkhemmet* (i.e., “the good home”), *lagom* (i.e., “moderation”), and *ensamhet* (i.e., “solitude”).

Folkhemmet is the larger metaphor for Swedish society. Holmberg and Akerblom (2007) translate this as the “good home” where one should experience equality, concern for others, cooperation, and helpfulness, such as any family member would expect. Pettersson (2008) furthers the definition by describing a kind of secular nationalism that values fairness, optimism for progress, and the idea that *folkhemmet* leads to social development and individual freedom. This metaphor and its corresponding values directly relates to the social welfare model that characterizes much of Northern Europe and has been in place in Sweden for at least 75 years as a kind of social

democracy based in socialism and capitalism (Gannon & Pillai, 2010). *Folkhemmet* is easily seen in the education system where the symmetrical or equality approach worked best for my students. Calling people by first names, interacting with low power distance, showing interest in the comparison of culture, and helping the guest professor as Tony and Emma volunteered to do are all reflections of the *folkhemmet* mindset. However, the gender situation and the sexism in the men’s speech cannot be explained by this concept. Of all the tensions in the classroom, this is the one that remains unexplained and may simply best be viewed as immature behavior. The teaching-learning situation was, overall, a fun and pleasant experience that reflected a negotiation of my values of hierarchy and their equality values. It was through the atmosphere of *folkhemmet* that the tension in values reached a level of comfort for most everyone involved.

Lagom as a cognitive mindset explains a significant portion of the behavior observed among the Swedish students. There is a saying in Swedish that “the tall poppy is cut down.” No one wants to “stick out” of the crowd by being noticed. In a highly stable country of just over nine million people, where homogeneity is the norm, to stand out would be to breach the cultural notions of equality that pervade Swedish society. To be the tallest poppy could mean a person is too beautiful, or conceited, or boastful of individual achievement, and it is discouraged. Rather, Swedes are encouraged to strive for *lagom* in their everyday life. *Lagom*, which has no equivalent English translation, embraces the idea of moderation, that is, one must “work hard, but not too hard, and eat enough, but not too much, and have enough money, but not too much” (Svensson, 1996, p. 51). In a public or business setting in Sweden, “selling yourself” by giving the highlights of your talents in thirty seconds would be considered vulgar, and according to business advisor Richard Gesteland, positive communication traits in Sweden include “modesty, humility, and a lack of assertiveness” (2005, p. 304). In terms of communication practices, *lagom* also means that a person uses language when appropriate and necessary. Talking just to talk (i.e., *dodprat*) is not common, and silence balanced with speech is more the conversational norm in Sweden when compared to what is practiced in the United States. All of this was evident in the student behavior—they spoke as necessary without reference to personal problems, nor did any one individual, other than Tony, stand out from the others.

Gannon and Pillai (2010) define *lagom* as “middle-road” and “reasonable” (p. 142). They trace the word to *la* meaning “group” and *om* meaning “around,” and relay one of the legends that goes back to the Vikings: that the word “is said to derive from a circle of men sharing a single mug: It was essential that no one take

more than his fair share in order to leave equal shares for all others” (p. 143). This leads to the assessment of *lagom* as the basis for the rational, well-ordered society that Sweden is known to be.

The events of the Swedish IT classroom easily embed in *lagom* because the students worked and studied in moderation to arrive at a balanced and equal life. The pass/fail grading system is really about achieving the mean, and most students in the class did not want to get excellent grades. The check system that I was using for homework and in-class assignments actually suited the idea of moderation. That half the students participated regularly in class discussion demonstrates a good balance. Other aspects of balance and moderation include the low power distance between students and professors manifest in first names, similar clothing, and friendly respect. Even when the students had problems, such as overlapping classes, getting all the reading done in English, and Helena’s poor essay due to money and time circumstances, those problems are more about being out of kilter or imbalance rather than a person’s ability to achieve. *Lagom* broke down in those cases because the pressure came from outside circumstances that were not usual.

My observation of Sweden over a 12-year period is that *lagom* works for Swedes, in part, because of the high standards set in the first place. In our culture and education system variability of preparation and performance by students challenges the delivery of instruction. Swedish students in my classes both here and in Sweden are simply more prepared. If everyone is meeting the bar, and that bar is set higher to begin with, it requires less notion of competition because it is a criterion-referenced system rather than a norm-referenced system.

Lagom as a sociological situation is changing even in this moment. Sweden has seen an increase in immigration due to displacement in other European countries, with inequality on the rise concerning ethnic minorities (Gould, 2001). In my class, the three students who were not Swedish were from Macedonia, Iran, and Kosovo—their families had fled from serious political trouble and/or war. A more conservative Swedish government is responding to this influx of immigrants with less than welcoming arms, and many Swedes are expressing hostility when it comes to sharing resources with non-Swedes. Although *lagom* has served as a psychological-sociological means of preserving stability for many centuries, the poppies in the field are now a range of heights and shades. von Bromssen and Olgac (2010) claim that Sweden’s current population is almost 17% from “foreign background” and that the notion of historical homogeneity is a myth. Even so, von Bromssen and Olgac (2010) acknowledge that the Swedish system

continues to enforce monocultural policies. Global economic pressure may see some of those poppies cut down as the very center of culture is destabilized by shifting populations.

Finally, the cultural value of *ensamhet* is linked by Holmberg and Akerblom (2007) to the Swedish preference for high levels of individualism. A person who is independent and has individual strength is seen to have *ensamhet*, or a type of inner peace that may be roughly translated as some sort of personal “solitude” (p. 46). Although popular translations of *ensamhet* include “loneliness” and “isolation,” the meaning used in this essay is a positive personal characteristic. Certainly the tension present in attendance, participation, and taking a holiday may be explained, in part, by the need to make individual decisions that best suit the student. Henrik’s situation with the dentist can be interpreted as one where he knew his personal responsibility was to go to the dentist appointment and sacrifice class. From his point of view, it was awkward to inform others of his own individual situation when he knew he had it under control. Likewise, Tobias’s trip to Tenerife could be interpreted as part of the value Swedes have for self-expression (Inglehart & Welzel, 2010) through solitude. It is common for Swedes to recognize when they are stressed and often take a few days off to recuperate. Very often, that means an escape to nature or some other peaceful setting. In fact, many Swedes own a *stuga*, the little red summer house out by a lake or in the woods, that serves as a place for escape and rejuvenation (Gannon & Pillai, 2010). The *stuga* is emblematic of *ensamhet*.

By identifying the dialectical tensions present in the classroom, and adding cultural values theory to the analysis, the interpretation of the communication process is rich. Discerning one’s own teacher competency as it is framed within the host culture rather than one’s own makes for a more accurate analysis. Extending the recommendations of Festervad and Kyle (2001), the experience described in this essay leads to several recommendations for teacher training:

1. Language training is insufficient for teaching abroad.
2. Cultural values training is an entry into deeper culture understanding.
3. Host teachers allow for constant conversation leading to reflection and correction of behavior on the part of the guest teacher.
4. Knowledge of the host educational system allows for more culturally appropriate classroom preparation.
5. Recognition that all relationships are characterized by dialectical tension acknowledges the cultural fluidity of everyday living.

Although individual institutions and professors assigned to teach abroad would need to decide how to specifically put these recommendations into actions, there are general ways to approach the situation. Offices of international exchange on campus keep databases of students and faculty who go abroad. Faculty could be paired with each other so that one who has already had a teaching abroad experience can mentor the faculty member getting ready to go. Workshops on cultural values training could easily be offered as part of pre-departure training for faculty. Reading lists could be distributed that allow faculty easy access to the literature in cultural values, intercultural communication, and relational dialectics. Other topics could be added as appropriate. The important thing is to be more systematic in helping faculty prepare for teaching abroad.

Conclusion

The Swedish case offers an opportunity to examine college teaching from an intercultural perspective that explains behavior beyond the general approach of competence based on language alone. In a bilingual situation where neither partner may be competent in the other's language, one may need theoretical explanations that delve into cultural values and the metaphoric implications for thinking and acting.

More research on the professor's experience is needed to understand the meaning and communication process that takes place in a teaching abroad situation. Such knowledge will foster more competent teaching and professional relationships with our international partners and among ourselves. The value of dialectical theory and cultural values as a framework for analysis was most instructive in this study, and I urge its application to other teaching abroad experiences. Swedish sociologist Jonas Stier (2002) has likened the international exchange experience to four simultaneous journeys: academic, cultural, intellectual, and emotional. Knowledge of *folkhemmet*, *lagom*, and *ensamhet* as specific extensions of Hofstede's dimensions of culture informed my classroom analysis with tools of metaphoric thinking. As professors participate more in international exchange, the use of relational theories, cultural values, and metaphors should assist in more competent professional interaction and inform communication in the classroom. The nuances that conceptual thinking yields can be layered onto patterned communication experience to construct another dimension of knowledge in pedagogic practice.

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ELIZABETH J. NATALLE, Ph.D., Florida State University, is an associate professor at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in the Department of Communication Studies and specializes in gender and intercultural communication. She has taught and worked in intercultural settings in Northern Europe for seventeen years.

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