

Significance of Intercultural Communication in Various Education Fields

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ABSTRACT

Intercultural communication is becoming increasingly important due to the rise of globalization and increasingly multicultural work environments. Because of this, the cultural intelligence and cross-cultural communication skills that come with studying in a foreign country are highly sought after by employers who seek to gain a competitive edge and break into in foreign markets. Acquiring the skills necessary to work with both domestic multicultural groups and in international areas is no longer an option but a necessity. There are few settings where cross-cultural communication does not play a significant role in daily interactions with the public and co-workers. Businesses, social service agencies, health care providers, educational institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and a thousand other occupational settings are all under pressure to recognize and appreciate the role that cross-cultural communication plays in achieving their goals.

INTRODUCTION

The Communication is an important mean of expressing yourself because it exists different ways of expression and so different kind of communication depending on the culture you belong to .The way of communicating will not be the same as other countries and it is important to know some values of other cultures and so of other ways of communicating for, first of all, avoiding some misunderstandings and then knowing better some aspects of different cultures.

That is why cross-cultural communication is an essential exercise to do; a person who come from a certain country does not necessarily get the same ideas about time, death, identity, as another one from a different country because each person has its own identity. First, a national identity, defined by a surname, a first name, citizenship, and a "personal" identity perceived as what are your activities, your opinions about issues or your experience in life. Sometimes, your own identity can be modified or influenced by different factors, for example religion, your environment, your family. The latter example seems to be a paradox because you can get your own opinions about something but you can be "influenced" by your familial surrounding or the society where you live (especially some notions that parents and even society teach you when you are a child, as patriotism or nationalism).

This influence can replace your previous vision of life and changing your way of expressing yourself and so your way of communicating but you can also adapt this influence to your own way of thinking and it can be resulted in a different way of communicating.

In spite of a certain influence coming from a close surrounding, everyone can develop its own identity through its opinions and experience and this is interesting to notice that even within a close group of people, each person get different identities which are expressed through diverse means of communication.

Cross-cultural communication is arguably more important today than in any other period of human history. One major consequence of this trend is that future success in most careers will increasingly depend upon an individual's ability to communicate effectively and appropriately across cultural boundaries. Cross-cultural communication is not limited to learning other languages, but also includes understanding how cultural patterns and core values impact the communication process - even when everyone is speaking English.

Whether it is creating smoothly working project teams; sensitively responding to customers, clients, and markets; or just living and working in a world where everyone has something to say, learning how to communicate cross-culturally is a crucial component that can promote those processes. Realizing that individuals from different cultures will express their thoughts in vastly different ways is a good start. So is developing an awareness of why hearing words alone is not sufficient to discern meaning. Sometimes silence communicates far more than speech. Such things as touching, eye contact, and other kinds of "body language" need to be observed and correctly interpreted because nonverbal communication carries important clues about the message the individual is trying to convey. In this rapidly changing world, where cultures and people circulate and interact at dizzying speeds, those people who know how to communicate effectively across cultures, in both personal and professional contexts, will have a crucial advantage over those who do not.

A 2011 study by the QS Intelligence Unit asked over 10,000 employers in more than 42 countries the question: "Do you actively seek or attribute value to an international study experience when recruiting?" The majority of employers (60%) responded 'Yes' to this question. These employers were then asked which skills gained from international study they looked for in the recruitment process. Predictably the top priority was language skills, however the second highest response was intercultural communication skills, an indication that employers are placing a higher value on cultural intelligence in the workplace.

One of the conclusions drawn from this study was that these days undertaking international study is not just about experiencing the culture and excitement of a new place, but is now increasingly important in positioning graduates for future success.

INTER-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION PRINCIPLES

Inter-cultural communication principles guide the process of exchanging meaningful and unambiguous information across cultural boundaries, in a way that preserves mutual respect and minimises antagonism. For these purposes, culture is a shared system of symbols, beliefs, attitudes, values, expectations, and norms of behaviour. It refers to coherent groups of people whether resident wholly or partly within state territories, or existing without residence in any particular territory. Hence, these principles may have equal relevance when a tourist seeks help, where two well-established independent corporations attempt to merge their operations, and where politicians attempt to negotiate world peace. Two factors have raised the importance of this topic:

- Improvements in communication and transportation technology have made it possible for previously stable cultures to meet in unstructured situations, e.g. the internet opens lines of communication without mediation, while budget airlines transplant ordinary citizens into unfamiliar *milieux*. Experience proves that merely crossing cultural boundaries can be considered threatening, while positive attempts to interact may provoke defensive responses. Misunderstanding may be compounded by either an exaggerated sensitivity to possible slights, or an exaggerated and over-protective fear of giving offence;
- Some groups believe that the phenomenon of globalisation has reduced cultural diversity and so reduced the opportunity for misunderstandings, but characterising people as a homogeneous market is simplistic. One product or brand only appeals to the material aspirations of one self-selecting group of buyers, and its sales performance will not affect the vast multiplicity of factors that may separate the cultures.

People from different cultures encode and decode messages differently, increasing the chances of misunderstanding, so the safety-first consequence of recognizing cultural differences should be to assume that everyone's thoughts and actions are not just like ours. Such assumptions stem from potentially devastating ignorance and can lead to much

frustration for members of both cultures. Entering a culture with this type of ethnocentrism, the assumption your own culture is correct, is another byproduct of ignorance and cultural misunderstanding.

Intercultural Communication Ethics

Communication is something that no one can escape and it comes in many forms. Whenever a person from one culture sends a message to be processed from a different culture, intercultural communication is present. It is important to recognize when this happens so you are able to make wise decisions as to how you will communicate. Intercultural communication ethics incorporates learning about different goods, the discourse that arises from and shapes the texture of those goods, and practices that enable constructive conversation in a postmodern world of difference. In any ethical dilemma situation, we have to make hard choices in considering the intent, the action, the means, the consequence, the end goal, the situation, and the embedded cultural contexts of the case. In an intercultural decision-making context, in particular, we often have to make difficult choices between upholding our own cultural beliefs and values and considering the values of the other culture. Acknowledging these different goods, values, and beliefs will help one when interacting with another person from a different culture. A knowledge of intercultural communication, and the ability to use it effectively, can help bridge cultural differences, mitigate problems, and assist in achieving more harmonious, productive relations. This is especially important in today's world where the market is global.

Rights, values and needs

Some cultural characteristics will be easy to identify, e.g. whether people are conscious of status or make displays of material wealth. But many rights are assumed, values are implied, and needs are unspoken, (e.g. for safety, security, love, a sense of belonging to a group, self-esteem, and the ability to attain one's goals).

For example, issues of personal security, dignity, and control will be very different as between an able-bodied and a disabled person. Similarly, there may be problems of respect when a person from a rigidly class-based culture meets a meritocrat, or where there is racism, sexism or religious intolerance in play. In such situations, identity is fundamental when disputing the proper role or "place" of the other, about who is in control of their lives, and how they present themselves to the outside world. But the reality is more deeply rooted in power relationships: about who is on top of the social, economic, and/or political hierarchy. Family members or long term rivals may be obsessed with their mutual competition.

People may misinterpret each other's motives. For example, one group may assume that they are simply exchanging information about what they believe, but the other believes that they are negotiating a change in behavior. This is most likely to arise when the parties are not completely honest with each other from the outset. Individuals may wish to protect their privacy, corporations may be concerned about industrial espionage, and politicians may be bound by requirements of secrecy in the national interest. Nevertheless, clarifying the purpose of the interaction is essential to eliminating confusion.

If time is not a factor and those interacting approach their meetings with good will and patience, effective communication is more likely. But, if the parties are under pressure (whether generated by external circumstances or internal needs), emotions may colour the exchange. Prejudice is a short-cut decision-making tool. In a crisis, fear and anger may trigger more aggressive tactics, particularly if the meeting is being staged under the gaze of the news media.

IMPROVING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

It is essential that people research the cultures and communication conventions of those whom they propose to meet. This will minimise the risk of making the elementary mistakes. It is also prudent to set a clear agenda so that everyone understands the nature and purpose of the interaction. When language skills are unequal, clarifying one's meaning in five ways will improve communication:

1. Avoid using slang and idioms, choosing words that will convey only the most specific denotative meaning;
2. Listen carefully and, if in doubt, ask for confirmation of understanding (particularly important if local accents and pronunciation are a problem);
3. Recognise that accenting and intonation can cause meaning to vary significantly; and
4. Respect the local communication formalities and styles, and watch for any changes in body language.
5. Investigate their culture's perception of your culture by reading literature about your culture through their eyes before entering into communication with them. This will allow you to prepare yourself for projected views of your culture you will be bearing as a visitor in their culture.

If it is not possible to learn the other's language, it is expedient to show some respect by learning a few words. In all important exchanges, a translator can convey the message. When writing, the choice of words represent the relationship between the reader and the writer so more thought and care should be invested in the text since it may well be thoroughly analysed by the recipient.

IMPORTANCE OF CROSS-CULTURAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS

In today's global business marketplace, the ability to communicate effectively and multi-culturally cannot be underestimated. As a communications expert with a background in behavioral and cultural science, I have to know how to effectively manage multi-cultural expectations. Over the years, I've shared my experiences with entrepreneurs and businesses all over the world. Here are some common cross-cultural issues for those entrepreneurs developing relationships with individuals or businesses from different cultural backgrounds:

- Not being proactive and adapting to different cultural business expectations. It's all too easy to get off on the wrong foot and become reactive.
- Not understanding how formality, hierarchy and timing can affect business. These things have a tremendous impact on negotiations and decision-making.
- Being perceived as too aggressive or even impatient in your business approach. Business often takes longer with different cultures and countries, so plan accordingly.
- Many cultures are more team-focused or "we" oriented. This can really impact your business style and marketing material. Also, avoid being egocentric or "I" oriented.
- A big taboo is unintentionally offending someone with your body language. This can be very difficult to recover from. A basic guideline is to use "opened-handed" gestures. Don't point with your index finger, use the OK sign or thumbs up and thumbs down.

Here are five keys to successful cross-cultural communications for your business partnerships:

1. Be proactive. Start by focusing on creating trustful partnerships, not on the business at hand.
2. Use some cultural rapport. Adapt your marketing material and business approach as needed.
3. Organize productive interactions that ensure a "win-win" for all parties.
4. Develop strategies for relationships and business cycles based on appropriate levels of formality, business hierarchy and timing.
5. Learn the "do's and don'ts" of the country and cultures with which you're partnering. In short, be well prepared.

Soft skills are crucial because these are the social skills that enable us to work effectively and "fit into" the workplace. Examples of soft skills include, showing initiative, demonstrating integrity and ethical behaviour, being motivated, and having a positive attitude.

Professional communication skills are another example of soft skills that are required to effectively exchange information. Examples of communication skills include, negotiating and influencing, interviewing and counselling, working in a team, and delivering presentations.

Both soft skills and communication skills are critical for effective interpersonal communication. This involves verbal and non-verbal elements of communication including words, gestures, and body language which differ from culture to culture.

Cultural differences influence both our communication and our behaviour. As a result of these differences, what might be considered effective communication in some cultures might be viewed as unclear or inappropriate in others, and in turn, impact communication with culturally diverse colleagues and clients. In addition to these differences, "workplace culture" (i.e., the collection of unwritten rules in the workplace) can be very different from country to country, and can prevent effective workplace integration. The need for effective intercultural communication skills among all employees is imperative in today's global workplace.

In recent years practitioners in a wide variety of fields - scientific cooperation, academic research, business, management, education, health, culture, politics, diplomacy, development, and others - have realised just how important intercultural communication is for their everyday work. Fast travel, international media, and the Internet have made it easy for us to communicate with people all over the world. The process of economic globalisation means that we cannot function in isolation but must interact with the rest of the world for survival. The global nature of many widely diverse modern problems and issues such as the environment, governance of the Internet, poverty and international terrorism call for cooperation between nations. Intercultural communication is no longer an option, but a necessity.

Because important decisions in business, politics, education, health, and culture these days usually effect citizens of more than one nation, the question of whether communication between people of different nations is effective and whether all parties emerge with the same understanding is of crucial importance. Individuals who deal with people from other cultures want to learn how to improve their performance through improving their communication skills. Numerous resources have sprung up to meet this emerging market in the business, academic and international relations communities: leading authors have written books and articles on the topic; business services provide consultation for improving the conduct of international business; universities and other educational institutions offer programs or degrees in Intercultural Communication; and researchers have established international journals and academic societies specializing in research on intercultural communication.

PROACTIVELY PREPARATION FOR MULTI-CULTURAL BUSINESS

- **Awareness is the first step!** Observe how people communicate with you in person, on the phone and by e-mail. Notice if they are more formal and expressive or more direct and to the point.
- **Know your facts.** Be aware of relevant historical data, economic issues, major industries, cities and geography, to name a few. There is nothing more embarrassing than not knowing your geography while working in a new country!
- **Hone your cultural rapport.** For example, when Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah visited then-US President George Bush at his ranch, they were photographed strolling hand in hand through the bluebonnets. This was an important sign of their friendship and trust. Sometimes when managing international business relationships, you need to go beyond your personal comfort zone!
- Keep in mind that we are homogenizing as a global culture, so we can't ever take cultural tendencies for granted.

CONCLUSION

Through this study, we have found that as the lack of knowledge of another culture can lead, at the best, to embarrassing or amusing mistakes in communication. At the worst, such mistakes may confuse or even offend the people we wish to communicate with, making the conclusion of business deals or international agreements difficult or impossible. In a world that is increasingly interconnected, the success of organizations and their people depends on effective cross-cultural communication. Inter-Cultural program participants acquire cross-cultural knowledge, build intercultural expertise, and develop global capabilities in order to maximize value and minimize the risks associated with being involved in international activity. But active management of the internationalisation process and a conscious effort to acquire new skills will release fresh sources of competitive advantage.

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