Globalization and the Need for Intercultural Communication Skills

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Abstract

In this article I will demonstrate how globalization of the world economy has created a need for the development of individuals with intercultural communication skills. The discussion will begin with a basic discussion of terminology and continue through a description of the various problems in inter-cultural communication, which results when people must function with and among people from other cultures. I will focus on the problems which students who are involved in international programs might have with cultural shock. I will advocate developing training programs that may better prepare students or other international sojourners for intercultural exchanges by giving them a better sense of what they may go through personally and how to cope with the various stages of cultural shock. It is hoped that by designing good preparation programs, that international sojourners will be able to benefit more from their foreign experiences and/or be able to conduct business better. Intercultural communication skills will better prepare the sojourner for life in their new context and reduce misunderstanding between various cultural mindsets. The discussion will end with recommendations for the development of intercultural communicators, people who can work successfully in a number of diverse cultures, and the role that must be played by universities in order to prepare their students for what is increasingly a truly global, multi-cultural work space.

> *For myself, earth-bound and fettered to the scene of my activities*
> *I confess that I do feel the differences of mankind, national and*
> *individual....I am in plainer words, a bundle of prejudices—made up of*
> *liking and dislikings—the veriest thrall to sympathies, apathies, antipathies.*
> *Charles Lamb*

Many people have trouble relating to people of other cultures. They find travel to other countries interesting, exciting or beautiful and their trip would have been perfect except for all the foreigners. These people suffer from cultural shock in their new surroundings. They lose their bearings because they are out of their own culture and the comforting signposts that are provided by it. In the past, if one felt uncomfortable around people of another culture, it was easy to avoid contact. One just didn't go

abroad and stayed away from areas where people of a different culture might be found living. It was easy to isolate oneself in one's own familiar cultural arena. One did not have to associate with people of a different culture. Today's world is different. The globalization or internationalization of companies has created a dynamic, mobile work force that has broken down the isolation of various cultures. A Japanese worker may very well be working under a French manager or visa versa. Some offices may be made up of Italians, French, Danes or others. Women managers may also be a new and unsettling factor in these international offices. It is the duty of universities to prepare and train their students for this new professional lifestyle. Universities must accept the challenge of creating graduates who are sensitive to intercultural problems and can function in a multicultural environment. This paper will discuss ways in which universities may instill intercultural communication skills in their students so that they may better function in the global work force.

I would like to begin the discussion by defining culture. Webster's II New Riverside University Dictionary defines culture as "the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought typical of a population or a community at a given time." Another source defines it as "the shared assumptions, values, and beliefs of a group of people which results in characteristic behaviors" (Storti, 1999 p. 5). If one can accept these two similar definitions, it is easy to conclude that individuals are programmed by the various values, beliefs, taboos, and superstitions that one has observed in action, in one's own culture, or learned from one's parents and neighbors. These belief then become cultural looking glasses through which we perceive the world and judge those with whom we meet and interact.

However, culture is made up of many values and factors of which one may or may not be conscious. Many scholars conceive of culture as an iceberg, with the conscious elements being the small fraction observable above water and the rest lying hidden beneath the surface. The elements that may remain in one's consciousness may include the arts, drama, performing art, folk arts and crafts and cooking among others. The unconscious elements may include concepts of beauty and the grotesque, ideas of child raising, relationship to nature and animals, definition of sin, concepts related to time, space, work, logic and problem solving among an almost uncountable number of other factors. Every individual is made up of all these conscious and unconscious elements of his or her culture or cultures. It is only natural that an individual then looks at the world by comparing or contrasting the things he observes with what he has been programmed to accept as normal-his cultural norm that is. One naturally feels good about consonant experiences, those that agree with one's own culturally program sense of normalcy. Likewise, one avoids the disconsonant experiences, those that conflict with ones programmed cultural values(Pearce).

It is important to recognize that more than one culture may influence our

personalities. This can be seen in situations where one may be asked to define oneself or to acknowledge membership in sub-cultures. For example, I could say that I am an American, a Christian, an ethnic Slovak and a lover of sushi. Each of these classifications has the potential to create a perception in a listener of kinship with me or, perhaps, alienate or disgust him or her. As an American, I might be considered a hero for all the charity work done by CARE or the Red Cross or other American NGO's. Likewise, I might be vilified as a mass murderer of children, the "Great Satin" as the result of some United States military action. The perception would depend on which culture the person was raised in and how that culture perceived Americans. Similarly, the fact that I am a Christian may cause others to bond with me or reject me according to their perception of what a Christian is or is not. Unfortunately, one's perception of these labels may cause one to expect me to hold certain beliefs he or she perceives to be part and parcel of that label. For example, a conservative Christian might expect all Christians to support the pro-life movement and perhaps be a non-drinker. Imagine how shocked and dismayed this conservative individual would be upon finding out that I support freedom of choice for women as well as enjoy drinking beer. His or her labeling system does not hold up and he or she would be confused and possible become angry with me because I do not hold true to his or her own perception of what a Christian should be. The fact that I am of Slovak ancestry also may create a situation where prejudicial perceptions may cause people to stereotype me as strong physically, but not one intellectually blessed. The fact I enjoy sushi and sashimi, may cause discomfort among friends who can not stand the thought of eating raw fish, or who's culture actually prohibits eating anything raw. At the very least, I could be viewed as having gone native, which could be a good thing or a bad thing. It would depend on the perception of the observer. It could be bad for one who places a high value on staying true to one's own culture, and good for one who places a high value on the ability to adapt to new cultures and learn from them.

Perhaps we can look at culture as the illusions we are taught about our own culture, and the illusions our culture teaches us about other cultures. We learn to categorize and label things and phenomena from an early age into good or bad, pleasurable or painful, likes and dislikes. In fact, forming prejudices and organizing one's world into categories is a natural normal function of the human mind. Allport opinions that "we cannot possibly avoid this process" and that one's "orderly living depends on it" (Allport, 1979 p.20). This organizing of the phenomena and experiences of our world allows one to make essential, necessary predictions of what will happen and what we should do in certain situations to prevent problems or pain for ourselves. For example, if one is driving and the taillights of the car in front light up, we know that the car is breaking and we do so too, to avoid hitting it. Likewise, our various cultures prepare us for life in it by providing us with the ability to predict what

might happen in a variety of situations. For example, in America, one will offer his hand to shake when being introduced. In others societies one may bow, nod or kiss. Being a man or a woman may also change how one is greeted. Standard etiquette says a woman does not have to shake hands. However, as a result of woman's liberation, many women are offering their hands, but men should still wait till the woman makes the first move and then gently, but firmly shake her hand, if it is offered.

It seems only natural to have positive prejudice towards the way things are done in one's own group or society and to feel uncomfortable when faced with new reactions to familiar stimuli or signposts, like the conservative Christian illustrated above. Differences need only to be slight to cause discomfort or more serious problems for the intercultural traveler. For example, I, like many Americans, think that Japanese drivers start their cars on blue lights and not green lights. This is because the aqua-green used in Japanese traffic lights does not appear to us as green, but as blue. This is a minor problem to be sure, but it demonstrates that the sense of color may be culturally based. To carry the traffic analogy further, I remember a sad story of an American who was killed when a car hit him after he looked left for on coming traffic instead of right when crossing a street in Tokyo. As tragic as this latter incident is, it demonstrates how even simple differences in culture can blindside one and cause many problems, which although not fatal, may interfere with our business and personal relations with members of a different culture.

If cultural problems are so complex, how can or why should we solve them. The answer is easy. We have no choice. As multi-national corporations acquire former rivals (Renault-Nissan, Sofmap-ZifDavis), and expand around the world, the possibility of working and living in another country or certainly in a multicultural environment increases. It is our job as educators to prepare our students for this new and dynamic work environment.

Once we have accepted the task of creating people with intercultural skills we must formulate a plan. Bunkyo University, among others, has instituted semester abroad programs for their students. International programs like these have proven to have effected students by giving them "increase maturity, new sense of self, improved foreign language skills, greater appreciation for the diversity of other cultures, and increased readiness to work in a global market place" (Akande, Slawson, 2000). Furthermore, the research on the effect of foreign study programs revealed that 26% of students, who participated in such programs, went on to a Master's Degree and 15% went on to earn a Doctoral Degree. The percentages for all college students were 28.5% for masters and 2.6% for Doctorates. These results indicate that students who participate in foreign programs are more apt to continue their studies. Whether this is related to the programs' direct effect, or something in the original make up of the students who chose to participate in foreign programs is not clear. However, the

higher post graduate degree rates support the proposition that there is a difference between those who go abroad and those who don't. It is reasonable to assume that the experience abroad helped to shape their future by breaking down the walls between their home culture and the one visited. Study abroad apparently gives the participants a deeper understanding of at least one other culture which may have given them the personal desire or courage to search for more understanding of the world by going on to higher degrees. Another interesting finding of this research was that over 90% of respondents of both alumni (1950-1997) and students (1998-99) strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that study abroad helped them learn something new about themselves. Likewise, 88 % of alumni and students agreed or strongly agreed that foreign programs made them more comfortable interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds and that the programs helped them to better understand their own cultural values and biases (Akande, Slawson, 2000). I offer these results as proof of the inherent value of foreign exchanges in creating more culturally sensitive people or intercultural people. It seems that living abroad for a time can impact a person for life. One grows by exposing oneself to a new world, new values and one begins to look at the world through more than one pair of cultural glasses giving oneself more flexibility to accept and understand people from other cultures. In short, these foreign experiences can start one on the road to becoming an intercultural traveler if not a multicultural person.

However, just developing foreign programs is insufficient. The programs must give the students the best possible experience abroad. This means that the students, or other intercultural sojourners, be well prepared for their foreign experience. The problem is that many schools that run foreign programs are focused only on developing the students' skill in the target foreign language. Few programs focus on developing the students' intercultural communication skills before they leave Japan. There are many reasons for this. Some people believe that since there are many foreigners teaching English and other foreign languages on our campuses, that the students receive enough cultural exposure to insure a good experience in a foreign language program abroad. Other people point out that their curriculum doesn't allow enough space to incorporate a special program for intercultural communication for students going abroad. This is an unfortunate state of affairs. As pointed out above, intercultural travel can be very uncomfortable unless the participants are well prepared. This is true of a program of any length, but especially true in programs involving longer periods abroad, the students should be well prepared for the feelings they may experience in the foreign culture.

As I outlined in the discussion above, when one travels abroad one takes his or her native culture and accompanying system of perception, predictions and ideas of norm into their new culture. Problems arise when the sojourner finds that his or her old ideas about what is normal or not, are no longer valid. The sojourners may

become disoriented when their culturally programmed assumptions, predictions, actions and responses do not work in their new culture. The same system of actions and reactions that were a source of comfort for them in their home culture now becomes a source of pain. Their instincts fail them. They enter a period of cultural shock.

Cultural shock may not be entirely preventable, but certainly it can be lessened, by teaching perspective sojourners about it and how to deal with it. Kalervo Oberg has stated that there are four main stages one experiences in a successful migration from cultural shock to adaptation: the honeymoon, hostility, humor and home (Trelsted-Porter, 2000). During the honeymoon stage, the traveler will be ecstatic about everything in his or her new surroundings. The host culture will appear to be fantastic, the people warm and friendly, and the customs, charming or quaint. The traveler may write home that: "These people, despite their poverty, really know how to enjoy life." "People seem relaxed and unhurried."

The honeymoon period doesn't last, and not everyone passes through the honeymoon period. Some sojourners go straight to experiencing hostility. The hostility stage can be marked by several phenomena. One may reject the host culture and its people. Letters back home may contain phrases like: "These people have no respect for life." "The people are dirty." "The police and government are both crooked." "The people are really cold and unfriendly."

The sojourners in the hostility stage may reject the host culture by idealizing elements of their own culture. They may focus on some minor difference like the manners and behavior of the drivers in their home country being far superior to those in the their host country. They may exalt to all who will listen how the drivers in their home country are more courteous, considerate and much more safety conscious than the drivers they have observed in the host country. What these sojourners may fail to grasp is that their fixation on the apparent chaotic driving habits of the drivers in the host nation is really symptomatic of a broader sense of disorientation and confusion they are experiencing in the host culture. In short, they are in cultural shock. They long for their home culture, not because the traffic manners may be more logical to them, but because most things would make more sense for them in their home culture. During this stage, hostility may even be directed at one's own culture making it hard to distinguish it from the honeymoon period. This kind of hostility may make an individual feel that compared to her new context the Japanese, for example, are too fashion conscious, uncommunicative, up tight, impolite as well as bad mannered. This later kind of hostility is difficult to deal with because the effected individual will think that he is dealing with his new context in a "correct manner," willingly accepting the beauty of the new culture, respecting its tenets and affirming the value of the customs of the new context. However, this hostility to one's own culture may create hostility toward other Japanese in the group. The

individual may disassociate herself or himself from the rest of the group rejecting them and their apparent bad customs and inability to adapt to the new context. But, by rejecting one's own culture and the people from it, the individual is really rejecting oneself as well, which can create larger personal problems later.

Participants who enter the hostility stage can also cause a problem with the on site-staff. The effected participant might project his hostilities on to the group leader or the host institution's staff. The unhappy sojourner might complain that her uneasiness could have been prevented, if only the leader paid more attention to the needs of the individual, planned a more relaxed schedule, or had provided more information about the places and the people they were seeing. Of course, the disgruntled participant is only looking for a scapegoat for the discomfort he or she may be feeling in the context of the new culture and doesn't wish to face the fact that he or she is in cultural shock and must deal with it

Humor, Oberg's third stage of cultural shock, occurs when the sojourner is willing to make light of his or her confusion. The individual lets laughter ease the tension caused by not knowing how to act in the new cultural context, not knowing what is appropriate, or not knowing how to make himself understood. When an individual reaches this stage, she may find that humor, eases the tensions and allows her or him to ask questions and actually learn more about the host culture.

The final or "home" stage begins when the sojourner reaches a comfortable level in his or her new cultural context. There still might be awkward moments and difficulties with certain aspects of the culture, but the sojourner has now become comfortable with a certain level of discomfort. He or she has developed skills that allow him or her to learn, and to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of both the home culture and the host culture. Ideally, the sojourner will be able to accept his or her own cultural background and the effect it had on making him or her, an individual, and at the same time become more sensitive to other cultures in the world.

It is in this latter stage that the sojourner will be able to really make the most of his or her experiences abroad. It is at this stage that he or she will really be able to concentrate on study and get the most out of an academic program, or, in a business context, be valuable to his or her home company in a foreign country. Many international program directors believe that pre-departure training programs are essential in giving the international sojourner a head start on the road through the cultural shock phases discussed above. The question is "How should a university train or prepare an individual for life in a foreign culture?" The discussion will now turn to ideas on how to design a good preparation program.

First, schools must tell students as much about the target culture as they can before their departure. Schools could organize several classes in the school term immediately prior to departure. Ideally, the class should demand a lot of student

participation. The students could be assigned various research tasks about the target city, state and country as well as the university they will attend. For example, a group of students could be assigned to make a report about the city. One student could talk about the various museums in the city or famous parks and concert halls. Another student could report on the campus life, and facilities of the host university including the mascot's name, famous teams, championships won, the athletic conference the school belongs to, etc. Likewise, all of the various clubs, special interests and support organizations of the host university should be made known to the students. Some people may perceive this as only trivial material, not worth the time or the bother, but many international program directors, like Jim Trelsted-Porter of Augsberg College, find that this kind of information reveals much about the society that the sojourner is entering. The sports teams or clubs reveal much about the interests and concerns of students, as might special interest or support groups like "Campus Lesbians" and gay groups or right to life groups. Information like this has proven to be helpful in familiarizing the students with the city and school, so that they can more easily adjust to the environment of the host campus and host city. This kind of exercise is also useful in introducing new and interesting cultural elements, like introducing the students to fraternities and sororities at universities in the United States, as well as familiarizing the students with the environment of the school and the city it is in.

If the program is an old established one, participants from previous years should be included in these classes and made available to answer questions and relate their experiences about the target culture. The inclusion of previous participants in these preparation classes is highly recommend because it helps to reinforce their experiences as it makes them reflect on the benefits of the program for themselves as individuals. The exchange between previous participants and out going students has proven to be of immeasurable value in easing the fears and concerns of the outgoing participants as well as give them much first-hand information about the target culture from a student viewpoint(Quade).

Videos can also be used to help students prepare for the host culture. Promotional videos about the host school can be very helpful, but perhaps the best videos would be those taken on previous trips showing the various projects and campus activities of previous participants. Many commercial videos would also be good for teaching about the culture of the target culture. For example, the movie *My Family* would be good to teach about the Mexican influence in Los Angeles. These kind of videos are a great source of cultural information, some very real, others more of a Hollywood stereotype, but both kinds could lead to discussions which will prepare the students for life in their future culture.

In addition to the preparations directed at specific target cultures, pre-departure programs should introduce the students to basic concepts of intercultural communication.

The discussion should included basic terminology like high-context cultures (those which depend less on verbal encoded messages) low-context culture (those depending on more verbal encoding) monochronic cultures (those cultures more "orderly" where one to one interaction is more valued) polychronic cultures (those which allow one to pay attention to several people or things at the same time).

Granted, these terms may be difficult for the students to grasp, but they may provide the self-insight they need to better understand the various problems of communication with people in the host culture and any cultural shock they may have. Many international program directors are of the opinion that "It helps immensely to know these stresses are coming. If we expect something of a rough ride, we aren't caught off our guard"(Storti, 1990, p.9). In this way, one can think of this training as empowering the student-sojourner with the knowledge to handle problems in his new culture in a better manner. The student may be able to understand his communication problems as not a personal, individual lack, but a shared experience with other members of his or her culture. This sense of shared communication problems may help reduce the self-imposed pressure of the sojourner, and allow him or her to relax more and be less effected by cultural shock.

The preparatory course must focus on the special features the host culture may hold for the sojourner. For example, if the sojourner is Japanese (a high context culture) and the target culture is the United States (a rather low-context culture) the student should be introduce to various cultural situations that demonstrate how the difference might effect him or her. The prospective sojourners may find comfort in the fact that Professor Takeo Doi was shocked by the number of questions he was asked on his first trip to the United States. He related that he was asked questions on such mundane things like "Whether he would like a strong drink or a soft drink. Then if the guest asks for liquor...scotch or bourbon...how much he wishes to drink and how he wants it served" (Finkelstein, p.10). It should be pointed out to the students that the American is only being hospitable to his guest, catering to the guest's exact request. Japanese, on the other hand, would feel more comfortable leaving everything up to the host, afraid of embarrassing the host by requesting something the host did not have in stock. In fact, the Japanese would accept anything offered and not worry about his or her own preference, where as an American may not even touch his or her unordered drink, if it was not to his or her liking. After an example of this kind has been introduced to the students, the facilitator should engage them in a discussion about their own preferences and whether they prefer the American way or the Japanese way.

After the discussion, the session should include practice conversations that illustrate several situations in which cross-cultural miscommunication might occur in the United States or another given culture. Fortunately, several writers have provided us with experiential exercises and activities, which can aid facilitators. For example,

Craig Storti's *Cross-Cultural Dialogues* has provided us with a splendid assortment of dialogues on which to model our own dialogues for students or other sojourners. These could be used for English conversation, as well as to discus the various ideas and attitudes expressed and possible cultural misunderstandings that could result from a given dialogue. Other useful books like *Experiential Activities for Intercultural Learning* and similarly entitled books can be useful in instilling people with intercultural sensitivity through classroom activities. Also, simulation games like An Alien Among Us, Barnga and Ecotonos have also been found effective in teaching cultural sensitivity. The goal of this kind of sensitivity training is perhaps best expressed by A Code of Ethics for Tourists developed by the Christian Conference of Asia:

> Travel in the spirit of humility and with a genuine desire to learn more about the people of your host country
>
> Be sensitive to the feelings of other people, thus preventing what might be offensive behavior on your part. This applies to photography as well.
>
> Cultivate the habit of listening and observing, rather than merely hearing and seeing.
>
> Realize that often the people in the country you visit have time concepts and thought patterns different from your own, this does not make them inferior, only different.
>
> Instead of looking for that beach paradise, discover the enrichment of seeing a different way of life, through other eyes.
>
> Acquaint yourself with local customs-people will help you.
>
> Instead of the Western way practice of knowing all the answers, cultivate the habit of asking questions.
>
> Remember that you are only one of thousands of tourists visiting this country and do not expect special privileges.
>
> If you really want your experience to be a home away from home, it is foolish to waste money on travelling.
>
> When you are shopping, remember that bargain you obtained was only possible because of the low wages paid to the maker.
>
> Do not make promises to people in your host country unless you are certain you can carry them through.
>
> Spend time reflecting on your daily experiences in an attempt to deepen your understanding. It has been said that what enriches you may rob and violate others.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe that schools should incorporate intercultural communication courses into their curricula, not just for those students participating in foreign programs, but for all students, in order that they might be better prepared for careers

in the multicultural, global work force. If there is no room in over crowded curricula, then the cultural training may be introduced in the various language education classes. Bunkyo University is fortunate to have an excellent staff of dedicated fulltime and part time teachers who are using some of the methods mentioned in this paper in their languages classes. The dedication, talent and professionalism of these teachers has helped our students adjust to cultures they have encountered on Bunkyo's various international programs and we have experienced no serious cultural shock problems. However, as the length of time of our programs, or any other university's program, increases, I see a clear need for more classes dedicated to developing intercultural communication skills and cultural sensitivity. Beyond the sphere of the university too, intercultural communication skills will be come more and more important as the economic globalization process continues. Universities must provide their students with the attitudes and intercultural communicative skills necessary for a professional life in what has already become a dynamic global work force.

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