

Rude or Right? Communication Blunders in the Intercultural Context

With the advent of technology, there is also the advent of a whole new way of communicating (Howard, 2005; Klinenberg & Benzecry, 2005). Alongside the new ways of communicating is the expanded cultural diversity of the communicators (Rantanen, 2005; Wittmer, 1992). How do you know if a student's silence is respect or misunderstanding? When is it appropriate to force an issue, and when is it based on a background difference? This paper will explore issues related to understanding and interpreting the actions of students and faculty. Through this paper it is hoped to raise awareness to help limit miscommunication in the classroom. Issues under consideration will include both nonverbal and verbal languages such as how to use your hands, personal space, voice tone, eye contact, manner of address, meaning of silence, and more (Backlund, Ivi & Javidi, 1996). Examples will be shared and explored to try to expand knowledge of what these seemingly inconsequential acts can mean.

Introduction

A student is insulted when you cross your legs and the sole of your shoe is exposed. Another student won't shake your hand when extended. One insists on calling you by your full title and is insulted when this implied courtesy is not reciprocated. Why is this happening? With the growth in multicultural societies, and the growth in distance education, there is also a growing need for awareness of cultural differences (Hon, Weigold & Chance, 1999; Kim 2002). What may seem an innocent act on the communicator's end can be seen as rude, obnoxious, or even downright insulting on the communicatee's end (Eckert, 2005; Obermeyer, 2006). As Backlund, Ivi and Javidi found in 1996, and Mahoney and Schamber found in 2004, the unconscious mindset needs to be exposed – we need to become aware of these differences so that we do not mistakenly convey through our nonverbal actions a message we do not wish to so do.

Culture affects the way we act, think, believe, perform, behave, in other words, the way we are (Kim 2002; Rantanen, 2005). Each of us is a member of more than one culture – our gender, our place of living, our place of origin, our place of work, our place of school, our place of worship, and more (Lin & Kinzer, 2003). What is acceptable in one culture, such as at school, may not be acceptable in another, such as our place of worship. Being competent in the culture means that not only is there an awareness of barriers in communication, but also knowing about the other cultures around us and their means of communication (Bentacourt, 2004; Lane, 2005).

These educational cultures can include learning styles, and “the nature of interpersonal communication in the classroom” (Holmes, 2004, p. 296). Fisher noted in 1985 “culture includes: norms of politeness; teacher/student expectations and roles; and guidelines on local customs or rules that concern grading exams, holding office hours, counseling students” (p. 67). Both Fisher and Holmes appear to agree, even over almost 20 years, that interpersonal communication – how one acts and expects others to act in the classroom – are important aspects of the educational culture. Condon (1986) found even earlier that culture has to do with how we behave in the world, and is based on how we were brought up.

Cultural differences, just as any difference, are not necessarily based on a 'right or wrong' continuum. We, as both communicators and communicates, must be aware of these differences to avoid their becoming barriers, or inadvertently influencing attitudes and behaviors (Brislin, 1981; Byrnes, 1992, p. 14). Without such an awareness, cultural biases form, and are transmitted, inhibiting communication even more (Backlund, Ivi & Javidi, 1996). The question becomes not one of if such a thing exists, but rather how to deal. Should the dominant culture be imposed or should awareness be raised of the differences and "mutual respect of the divergences" be encouraged? (Ballendorf, 1980, p. 33).

Whether consciously or subconsciously, harsh judgments are often made when others do not act as expected. Lane (2005) notes that this is often a result of differing assumptions, values, and/or virtues, rather than because the person is irresponsible, demanding, or unreasonable. These differences are often quite scary – we often prefer the status quo and the familiar to the new and different. The challenge "to reconsider ethnocentric views of the world and negotiate each intercultural encounter with an open mind and as a unique experience" (Hwa-Froelich & Vigil, 2004; Mahoney & Schamber, 2004, p. 312) is one we must all accept to be successful in today's multicultural society. Becoming aware of these skills is of utmost importance, but so too is the practicing of these skills, through whatever means possible (Briskin & Yoshida, 1994).

While there are situations in which all members will abide by well-structured interactions permitted by the norms provided, there are times when such guidance is not offered or shared which can cause discomfort or even miscommunication (Brislin, 1981).

Method

When one considers culture, a strong force in the creation of a cultural background is the country of origin – whether that of the person or their ancestors. This paper focuses its analysis on countries of origin, using *Country Watch* to gain data on the cultural do's and taboos of various countries. *Country Watch* was accessed on 28 March 2007 for each country listed in the database. The "Cultural Etiquette" sections were examined with selected results listed below.

Time

There are two ends of the spectrum regarding time – monochronic and polychronic. Monochronic is a clock-based view of time, where a time parameter is set for each activity. Those with a monochronic time value system place a strong emphasis on deadlines, due dates, and punctuality. To disregard a date or appointment is considered rude, irresponsible, and unreasonable. In Bulgaria, for example, punctuality is considered to be of high importance. In Slovakia, punctuality is considered very important for both business and social functions.

Yet, to those with a polychronic time value system, or a relative time system, it is more important to complete what was started without rushing, and to start the next thing when one is done. For example, in Bangladesh, goodwill and social rapport is established before the business meeting will start. In Belarus, another polychronic culture, even though a date may be set for a specific time, it can take up to an hour (or more) for the event to actually start. However, Belgium, a monochronic society, expects punctuality, making appointments well in advance, and prompt responses to any requests

and a timely adherence to all deadlines. In Belize, there is a relaxed attitude towards time, it is not advisable to obsess over time in this polychromic culture.

Punctuality is one aspect of time. Being punctual, when defined as adhering to a time on the clock, is a characteristic of a monochromatic society. In a few cultures, such as Australia and New Zealand, tardiness is seen as a sign of a lackadaisical attitude. Other cultures expect punctuality in both business and social situations, such as in Africa, China, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, New Zealand, Romania, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, and Tunisia. Other cultures have an expectation of punctuality only in the business setting, while the social setting has no such expectation, in fact often finding that a social setting requires one to be late. Cultures expecting punctuality only in business, but not in social, settings include Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala, Luxembourg, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Panama.

There are cultures, however, that have a mixed view towards time in a different way. Rather than distinguishing between social and business situations, these cultures difference between expectations for natives and for foreigners / visitors. Such countries include Bolivia, where business meetings may not start on time and locals may arrive late, while expecting punctuality from visitors; or Malta and Moldova, where a relaxed sense of time is held by natives but foreigners are expected to be on time.

Unlike Canada, where meetings are formal, results-oriented, and punctual, other cultures hold a truly relaxed sense of time. In these polychromic societies, such as in Madagascar, and Uganda, it is not uncommon for members to arrive late at meetings and for meetings to run overtime. While in Kenya, any question cannot be asked without first a greeting, a polite question about the person, and asking how much time the person has first.

Besides meetings, or physical contacts, there is also the question of deadlines. In places such as Luxembourg, there is a cultural tendency to adhere to deadlines and expect the same from others. Brevity is also a characteristic valued in some countries, such as Australia and New Zealand. Other places, while not being specifically monochromatic or polychromatic, have a slow pace of progress with negotiations, such as Bolivia or the Czech Republic, where methodical and painstaking care are taken with all business planning and all business dealings are considered with meticulous specificity.

Another aspect of time is that of scheduling. Whether one can drop in unannounced, such as in office hours, or if one is expected to have an appointment with the instructor, even during office hours. In all of Latin America, as well as in Australia, Luxembourg, and New Zealand, it is considered rude to drop in unscheduled, and therefore such students will make an appointment, even if the instructor insists on open office hours. This might make it hard for a student who has a question but did not make an appointment to 'just appear' to ask a question, even when the instructor insists on an 'open office' as in Saudi Arabia. Scheduling can even include whether one can just enter, as in the Saudi Arabian 'open office,' or if one should, as in Norway and Finland, wait outside a door to be invited in, and again wait to be asked to sit. Some cultures, such as South Korea or Spain where several invitations might be necessary before a person will accept and come to the occasion – be it office hours, a social event, or a business event.

Time can also be the idea of length of time spent on various social niceties. For example, the greeting is an abbreviated or an extended greeting more appropriate. In

Azerbaijan, in business settings, preliminary handshakes and/or greetings to all in the room as well as perfunctory conversation are appropriate before beginning the official discussion. Ugandans believe that all in the room should be greeted, whether or not involved in the situation directly. In such places as Colombia, Costa Rica, the Czech Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Guinea, Hungary, Indonesia, Lebanon, Mexico, Morocco, Namibia, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Poland, Romania, Tanzania, Turkey, Uruguay, and Venezuela it is considered disrespectful and thoughtless to have a quick greeting, with a longer greeting paying attention to social conversation more appropriate. In certain countries, it is especially important to begin conversations with questions about the others' health and life before embarking on business; these countries include Afghanistan, Bolivia, Comoros, Iran, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan, Kuwait, Libya, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Knowing for how long, or how much time, to spend on the preliminaries can help set a student at ease, and open the avenues of communication more easily. However, while knowing whether or not to have preliminaries can help, knowing how long can also help. For example, in Australia, while punctuality is appreciated, a short time should be spent on small talk before beginning business.

Direct vs Indirect

The direct communication culture prefers originality, encourages criticism and interactiveness in the classroom. The indirect, on the other hand, prefers to offer any difference of opinion in a roundabout way, doesn't encourage criticism of authorities such as teachers, and encourages a one-way interaction in the classroom (teacher to student). In terms of learning theories, the student from a direct communication culture might prefer a constructivist, 'guide on the side' approach; while a student from an indirect communication culture would prefer a behaviorist, or 'sage on the stage' setting. This can cause even larger problems when considering differences between teacher and student, not only among students, as the teacher must change their way of teaching to better suit the students (Associations, 1998, p. 8), or else must encourage the student to change their way of learning to meet the expectations of the teacher (Tam 2000). Does the student want to be taught, as in South Africa where children are raised to only speak when spoken to, or do they want to be guided through the Socratic Method (Jones, 2006) as in Australia and Brazil, for example, where heated debates are common. In Brazil, in fact, it is also common to have disagreements and interruptions during their outgoing and animated lively conversations. The issue of South African children being raised to speak only when spoken to can also cause a conflict when a teacher or other professional seeks to override a parents' goal in favor of the children's rights (Hwa-Froelich & Vigil, 2004), such as a teacher encouraging a student to have the right to contradict in class.

Macdonald (2004), points out a need for encouraging students and instructors to use the Socratic method, in that "the communicative potential of e-learning has given rise to a generation of courses which employ a social constructivist approach, by using online media to support distributed collaborative interaction and dialogue" (p. 216). Particularly in internet-based, paperless courses, students must be active learners (Spiceland & Hawkins, 2002) – they must be direct communicators.

In communicating with students of various cultural backgrounds, there is a need to find a happy medium between direct and indirect communication. While students

from such countries as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand are direct people, preferring a direct bottom-line approach, the majority of cultures prefer a less direct approach. For example, rather than giving a direct 'no' countries such as India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mexico, Panama, the Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, prefer a polite but insincere 'yes' to avoid being rude or difficult. This makes one need to be aware of what a 'no' or 'maybe' or 'we will see' means. While it is hard to overcome the inborn intention to say, or not say, the word 'no' it is important to portray one's true intentions to avoid misunderstandings. In Thailand, the desire to avoid confrontation might go so far as the person pretending to not understand or to make excuses. In all instances, while it might be tradition to expect others to read between the lines, this cannot be expected in a multicultural environment, as the background knowledge to so do might not be evident or present. Indonesians not only avoid conflict by attempting to avoid saying 'no,' they also have a hard time accepting a direct negative answer, preferring to read between the lines upon receipt of a communication as well.

Besides providing a negative response, another example of indirect versus direct communication is that of making accusations or disagreeing. For example, in Japan, one should not make an accusation directly. Various other countries, such as Malaysia and Singapore, prefer not to disagree openly as this will remove 'face' from others.

While some countries might prefer a direct approach to one's accomplishments, others might view this as boasting. Whether boasting outright, or insisting on the value of a title, this can cause cultural misunderstandings and one needs to be aware of such when discussing, for example, with a member of a group of students what their role was. For example, in Australia, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, North Korea, Singapore, South Korea, and Thailand, boasting is considered improper, as is flaunting one's abilities, or excessive use of titles or other characteristics to insist on getting one's way. However, in many other countries, title, status, and/or age might indeed be a characteristic to be proud of, to flaunt, and to use for one's own advantage. For example, in Malaysia, while one should not boast, the elderly and those with seniority are given the utmost respect. In Burkina Faso, Ghana, Greece, Japan, Laos, Malawi, Malta, Micronesia, Mongolia, Namibia, Nigeria, Samoa, Singapore, South Africa, South Korea, Swaziland, Switzerland, Turkey, Vietnam, Zambia, respect for the elderly is of great importance. Another characteristic that demands respect in certain countries is title, such as in Bolivia, China and India where title is highly valued, and Indonesia, where names are considered sacred so that care should be taken to learn how to pronounce these correctly.

Dependence

There are two ends of the spectrum here, consisting of various components. The first is independent versus dependent. The second is individualism versus collectivism. In either instance, the characteristics are similar. The independent is more concerned with saving one's own face, with the self, or, as Hillel put it, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" The interdependent is more concerned with saving the face of others, with the group as a whole, or, as Hillel put it, "If I am only for myself, who am I?"

The dependence issue is also related to the level of talk, or conversation. The independent prefers to speak, interact, and values the individual opinion over the group's opinion; feeling that silence is bad. The interdependent feels that silence can help control

emotions, that there should be no direct challenges, and places a value more on the group than on the individual.

The independent is often seen as more assertive, more self-sufficient, more extroverted – sometimes to the point of encouraging disagreement or criticism, and more willing, sometimes even eager, to accept change. The interdependent is often seen as introverted, wanting to maintain harmony often to the point of appearing resistant to change, and supports conformity and humility.

This can cause problems in the classroom, such as with group projects and courses in which the student must interact to be considered present, such as internet-based, paperless courses. The student in the interactive course is encouraged to “aggressively seek and assimilate packets of knowledge” (Spiceland & Hawkins, 2002, p. 69), to be independent in their knowledge creation before sharing with others. On the other hand, the interdependent would prefer to create this knowledge together, or even to have the material given to them by an expert to avoid any challenges or losing of face by others who might not have the right answer.

In such countries where Islamic law is the basis for legal and juridical structure, such as Afghanistan, Egypt, Iran, Kuwait, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, there is interdependence on others as all follow the same belief systems, and follow the fulcrum of the Islamic religion. Other countries are also interdependent, such as Uganda, where business decisions are made by a group, and Samoa where there is a chief and extended family who administers all aspects of life based on need, honor and social standing. Palau has a tribal chief who holds authority over all. Yet, even with this interdependence in such countries, there is also the issue of ‘face’ which helps separate the dependent from interdependent cultures. When wanting to help others ‘save face,’ this is usually evident in an interdependent culture rather than a dependent culture, where members are concerned with helping others to remain ‘with face.’ Nicaraguans and South Koreans feel strongly about personal honor and ‘saving face,’ – they would never criticize someone, pull rank, or do anything else that would embarrass another in public. In Mexico and Panama, while not as extreme as Nicaragua, there is a tendency to not criticize others publicly.

Another issue in the area of dependency is that of ‘talk,’ or silence. The interdependent is often less likely to see ‘talk’ as an imperative in all instances, feeling that presence is sufficient. On the other hand, the independent is more likely to feel the need to talk, to make oneself known. For example, Indonesians, Japanese, and Finnish, are comfortable with silence, a time for thought, a concept that is often foreign to those in independent societies such as the United States. Danish and Ethiopian cultures, while not necessarily comfortable with silence, do not engage in ‘small talk’ unless the person is well known to them, and therefore might be more comfortable with silence in certain situations as well.

Power

“As one moves to cogenerative learning, where students and lecturer cogenerate the pedagogical materials, the traditional ‘power over’ of the lecturer dissolves and becomes more ‘power with’ the students” (Wildman, 1998, p. 510). The power might be indicated by the form of address used, both by the student and the instructor. For example, in countries such as Andorra, Argentina, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria,

Columbia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Estonia, France, Georgia, Germany, Guatemala, Honduras, Hungary, Lithuania, Mexico, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Ukraine, Uruguay, and Venezuela, the traditional form of address is the title and last name. While this seems traditional in the United States, and sometimes even formal, this is the standard in these thirty-four nations. An additional seven countries (Afghanistan, Bolivia, Brunei, China, Guinea, Kyrgyzstan, and Pakistan), according to *Country Watch* use the title as a form of address. Six additional countries, Finland, Denmark, Austria, Liechtenstein, San Marino, and Italy, all use the professional and governmental titles while an additional three countries (India, Norway and Switzerland) use professional and governmental titles along with surnames.

Another interesting observation is that in Chile the only professional title used is that of a medical doctor, although the proper and formal forms of address are adhered to otherwise. Belarus, on the other hand, uses the title of Professor as the traditional title of respect for experts in various fields, not only teachers.

Comoros, Iran, Jordan, Libya, Oman, Qatar, Syria, and Turkmenistan all use titles, particularly in the case of elders or superiors. A unique title here is that of 'haji' which can be used for a Muslim who has been on pilgrimage to Mecca.

Titles and insignias, often assumed particularly in the United States to denote honor and respect, are almost always used in twenty-seven countries, making this the second-most popular way of addressing others. The countries that are reported to use the title and/or insignia, including governmental form, are Antigua, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Cuba, Djibouti, Dominica, the Dominican Republic, Greece, Grenada, Guyana, Indonesia, Israel, Jamaica, Lebanon, Malaysia, Monaco, Nauru, Palau, Saint Kitts & Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent & Grenadines, Thailand, Trinidad & Tobago, Tunisia, Tuvalu, and Yemen.

Japan uses the last name, followed by 'san' (meaning Mr. or Mrs.) if no professional title is available, while in Sri Lanka there are two differing ways of addressing a person. The Sinhalese in Sri Lanka use Mahattaya (sir) or Nona (madame) following the last name, although again the professional title is used if available. The Tamil in Sri Lanka, on the other hand, use Aiyaa (father) or Ammaa (mother) to an older person, connoting respect. The Uzbekistan, use the first name, with the word 'uzbark' meaning brother or sister; although in Uzbekistan the title of a person, or the word 'haji' are also commonly used.

It is interesting to note that while New Zealand uses title and last name, Australia and Kiribati use the first name in addressing others while in Iceland and Canada it is acceptable to use the first name although a person can start formal and move to the familiar when invited to do so. In fact, in most countries it is considered appropriate to start out more formal, to err on the side of caution, and be invited to use a more informal address, such as a first name, than to err on the side of informal and be considered rude. Brazil is unique amongst the countries studied in that while it is traditional to start with *senhor* or *senhora* (Mr. or Mrs.) and the last name, the form of address often moves quickly to *senhor* or *senhora* along with the first name, as opposed to various other countries where the change will be to the first name alone.

This is of particular importance in a multicultural classroom when one wonders about the form of address used by a student. A student who insists on calling the

instructor solely ‘teacher’ or ‘professor’ might in fact be affording high respect to the instructor, although this might not appear so at first glance.

Another aspect of power is that of bargaining – is this considered appropriate or inappropriate. Should the final outcome be decided by a group decision, or by the individual in charge? In some countries, bargaining or haggling is considered unacceptable, such as in Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, and Vanuatu, while in twenty-one others it was directly noted in *Country Watch* to be an acceptable practice. Thus, students from such countries as Algeria, Armenia, Burundi, Central African Republic, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Greece, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, India, Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon, Lesotho, Malawi, Mali, Mauritius, Morocco, Sao Tome & Principe, South Africa, and Togo might find it more appropriate, or even invited, to haggle over an assignment or a grade as this is considered, often, appropriate in their own native lands.

Besides haggling, or bargaining, there are the general questions of debate and criticism. In Australia and New Zealand, for example, there is an aversion to tactical negotiation or high pressure efforts. Being considered a culture with low power does not mean there are no opinions or feelings, but often that these cultures are less direct such as in Belgium, China, Denmark, Finland Indonesia, Malaysia, Norway, Singapore, South Korea, Sweden, Thailand, and Tunisia where the people are restrained in temperament, avoid losing control of emotions and avoid being overly assertive in attempts to avoid confrontation rather than to express a sense of low-power. There are also cultures that are not low in power, but are also not an expressive culture, such as in El Salvador, Germany, Japan, Luxembourg, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom where the culture is reserved and formal. Cultures such as France, Romania, where there is a lot of expression, loudness, and/or boisterousness,

If one enters a room silently, or if one makes a point of entering with a cough or knock to announce one’s presence, which is considered correct? For many places, such as Afghanistan, Comoros, Iran, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan, Libya, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, it is appropriate to announce one’s presence, even if arriving late to class.

Conclusions

In summary, based on the evidence presented in this paper, it is evident that there is no one way to approach a multicultural classroom. Nor is it possible to create one classroom that will appeal to the diverse cultural representation in a single classroom. Rather, gaining an awareness of these differences, and writing guidelines specific enough to encourage those with differing backgrounds to meet the expectations of the instructor is the purpose of this paper. By creating materials addressing all expectations, the instructor will best serve the needs of **all** members of the classroom community, by explicitly outlining the behaviors, the cultural adaptations, necessary for each member.

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