

A MULTI-DISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO TEACHING CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

The ability of managers to interact with individuals from cultures other than their own, requires a concerted effort on the part of business educators and academics to 'train' and 'educate' today's students and tomorrow's managers in the area cross-cultural communication. This is not necessarily an easy task. Teaching cross-cultural communication requires a multidisciplinary approach, which goes beyond what is traditionally offered by trainers and educators. It requires the educator to design a course that includes not only culture-general but also culture-specific information that incorporates the study of history, religion, politics business, communication, and other social sciences. This paper includes discussion of material and methods from the author's own experience in incorporating a multidisciplinary approach in the conduct of a cross-cultural communication class.

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A MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO TEACHING CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

The interconnectedness and interaction of culturally diverse citizens, business and governments is arguably more evident today than at any time in history. The globalization of markets, the international movement of people and the increase in culturally diverse work places has meant an increasing requirement to be able to deal competently and effectively with people of differing cultural backgrounds. In international business there is a growing need for people to receive cross-cultural training (Black & Medenhall, 1990; Brislin & Yoshida, 1994; Tung, 1981). Barlett and Ghoshal (1989) argued that the only way transnational organizations can deal effectively with the complexities involved in cross border business is if they developed managers who have a global perspective.

In 1995, Professor Karpin in his report on Australian Leadership and Management Skills pointed out that Australian managers were not globally 'savvy'. An introspective domestic view and a limited international outlook was a criticism leveled at the Australian manager in the 1990s (Karpin, 1995). According to Karpin (1995) in order to succeed in the 21st century, Australians needed to develop a greater international focus. He called upon business educators to provide the country's future managers with the education and training to enable them to engage as world-class leaders. If managers in the future are to interact and develop an awareness of people from diverse cultures, an intensive effort on the part of business educators is required to 'train' and 'educate' students in cross-cultural communication.

Consequently, it is in this context that business schools have heeded the call and are educating their students to become effective cross-cultural communicators. In the U.S., business schools have introduced courses in cross-cultural business communication (Cheney, 2001; Varner, 2001). The situation is similarly replicated in Australia, where business schools are offering their students studies in cross-cultural communication and international management.

THE NEED FOR CROSS CULTURAL TRAINING AND EDUCATION

In the international business environment, the growing importance in understanding culture and its impact upon cross-cultural competency cannot be underestimated. International sojourners need a number of skills if they are to attain cross-cultural competency. These include:

1. the capacity to communicate respect
2. the capacity to be non-judgmental
3. the capacity to accept the relativity of one's own knowledge and perceptions
4. the capacity to display empathy
5. the capacity to be flexible
6. the capacity to allow everyone to have their turn to speak and
7. tolerance for ambiguity (Hofstede, 1991)

Cross-cultural training and education refers to formal efforts made in preparing people for effective interpersonal interaction when dealing with individuals from other cultures (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994). The training helps contribute to people's cross-cultural competency and enables them to develop an awareness of cultural difference (Gannon & Poon, 1997; Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, & Wiseman, 1991; Milhouse, 1996). Black and Mendenhall (1990) suggested that cross-cultural training provides for positive outcomes in terms of people's cross-cultural skill development, adjustment and performance. Cross-cultural training for expatriate managers was found to have a strong impact on cross-cultural skill development, adjustability and job performance (Deshphande & Viswesvaran, 1992). Gannon and Poon (1997), in a study of MBA students undergoing cross-cultural training and education as part of their course, found that that cross-cultural training promoted cultural awareness and confidence on the part of students. This study confirms the general proposition that cross-cultural training increased people's level of confidence in dealing with others of different cultural backgrounds (Milhouse, 1996).

EDUCATION AND TRAINING: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

After World War II, a plethora of theories, research agendas and training methods developed to aid the cross-cultural sojourner which helped the development of cross-cultural communication as a separate discipline of study (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994; Milhouse, 1996). The increasing number of programs of short duration offering cross-cultural training (preparing expatriates for overseas assignment) in comparison with university courses offering a more traditional education has resulted in discourse as to the synonymy between 'training' and 'education' (Bennett, 1986). For trainers and educators involvement in one does not necessarily mean involvement in the other, even though both should ideally be prevalent in programs which seek to impart cross-cultural knowledge (Bennett, 1986; Gudykunst et al., 1991; Milhouse, 1996).

In addressing this definitional discourse, Bennett (1986) argues that imparting cross-cultural knowledge at its most superficial level is through programs of 'orientation'. According to Batchelder, 'orientation' requires one to be "acquainted with the existing situation or environment" (cited in Bennett 1986:118). Orientation is seen as the most basic obligation of organizations sending employees on expatriate assignment (Bennett, 1986). It involves the supply of survival information about immediate expatriate concerns such as school systems, housing, and shopping (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994). It also includes pamphlets and books with cultural knowledge about the target destination and the ever-present lists of "do's and don'ts", often-reflecting stereotypical and non-contextualised information. Orientation can be characterized as the "*who, what, when and where*" of cross-cultural understanding, which reflects a non-comprehensive approach to cross-cultural training (Bennett, 1986).

Training moves beyond the parameters set by orientation to include the "*how*" of the cross-cultural sojourn (Bennett, 1986). Training involves the attainment of skills that will impact on the behavioural disposition of the sojourner in their new environment. For example, such programs address: *How can the individual increase their effectiveness in the new environment?* The role of the trainer is to help the trainee learn 'how to learn' (Harrison & Hopkins, 1967). The new overseas environment will mean new stimuli that the sojourner will need to understand and process in order to adapt to the new environment. Unless these are integrated in the training through experiential activity such as simulation exercises, role-plays and field visits, the sojourner may experience intensified culture shock if left to try and understand a culture from an orientation or education program alone (Harrison & Hopkins, 1967). Culture shock describes the situation of the sojourner who experiences distress as a result of being in and having to interact in an unfamiliar cultural environment (Oberg, 1960). Pedagogically the use of experiential exercises in training rests on the premise that adults learn by doing, being involved, and experiencing (Knowles, 1990).

The educational or intellectual perspective adds to the who, what, when, where and how information by incorporating the "*why*" (Bennett, 1986). Bennett argues that all preparations for sojourn assignment should incorporate the "*why*" or educational perspective. This helps the learner in understanding the theoretical underpinnings of what they have learned. Based on the need to achieve cognitive goals (students attain a detailed understanding of different cultures), education often relies on didactic teaching methods such as lectures, case studies and presentations. By learning why processes and behaviours are different in foreign environments the sojourner is then able to establish frames of reference which will aid him in interpreting and understanding issues that may arise in the new environment (Bennett, 1986). Ultimately, despite the lack of a definitive boundary between education and training the key difference may be the mode of instruction. Education incorporates more intellectual didactic methods whereas training emphasizes the experiential.

PEDAGOGICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH TO CROSS-CULTURAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

In attempting to set boundaries for educators and trainers as to the goals and course content of a cross-cultural communication course, Gudykunst et. al (1991) suggested that such courses need to incorporate a pedagogical and philosophical perspective. Instruction from a pedagogical perspective should achieve a combination of cognitive (understanding how communication is similar and different across cultures), affective (the ability to be able to understand and deal emotionally with the challenges faced in a new cultural environment) and behavioral (obtaining the necessary skills to be able to communicate and interact with people from other cultures) competencies (Bennett, 1986; Gudykunst et al., 1991). Similarly, Brislin and Yoshida (1994) suggested that cross-cultural training should include an agenda which incorporates issues of awareness, knowledge (*cognitive*) emotions (*affective*) and skills (*behavioural*) (*italics are the author's addition*). Such goals can be achieved through culture-specific and culture-general content via a process of intellectual and experiential instruction (Bennett, 1986; Gudykunst et al., 1991).

Philosophically, the issue under consideration is the use of a culture-general or a culture-specific approach to course content (Gudykunst & Hammer, 1983). The culture-general approach to knowledge incorporates theories and common themes based on seminal research that highlights the similarities and differences among cultures (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994). The approach enables students to understand issues that underpin cultural values without necessarily understanding the specifics about certain cultures. Culture-specific knowledge refers to norms, customs, values, rules and behaviours that are specific to a culture (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994). Due to the potential enormity of cultural rules and norms across different cultures inundating the trainee, Brislin (1994) suggests a thematic paradigm based upon concepts of work, time and space, language, roles, group versus individual, rituals and superstitions, class and status and values. This paradigm can help guide the trainee as to what needs to be learnt in order to understand specific cultures.

Gudykunst and Hammer (1983) encapsulate cross cultural education and training diagrammatically as a cross made up of two axes intersecting at the midpoint. The horizontal axis reflects the method of instruction - the didactic (intellectual)-experiential continuum and the vertical axis reflects the course content - the culture-general culture-specific continuum. Clearly then cross-cultural education and training need to incorporate elements of both continuums.

IMPLEMENTING AND TEACHING A COURSE ON CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

The following draws on the author's experience and insights concerning the development and instruction of a unit called Cross-Cultural Communication offered to post-graduate business students at university level. The unit is taught in a three-hour interactive seminar class and runs for 13 weeks. The unit has as its main objective the raising of student awareness and competency in cross-cultural communication. The author incorporates into the unit an integrative framework that addresses the need for cognitive, affective and behavioural goals (Bennett, 1986; Gannon & Poon, 1997; Gudykunst & Hammer, 1983; Milhouse, 1996) through a process of intellectual and experiential learning. The course content incorporates a combination of culture-general and culture-specific information. However the culture-specific information moves beyond the thematic paradigm described by Brislin (1994) above and integrates a broader a multi-disciplinary agenda.

CULTURE-GENERAL APPROACH

While agreeing that both approaches have their merits, Gudykunst and Hammer (1983) argued that the culture-general approach enables students to be prepared for dealing with a broader cross section of people from a range of cultures than did a culture-specific learning approach. Manifestations of such sentiments are reflected in a survey by Beebe and Biggers (1986) of 236

cross-cultural communication courses offered in the US in which they found culture-general information dominated over culture-specific in course content. Milhouse (1996) also found a preference for the teaching of culture-general information as distinct from culture-specific information. According to Milhouse (1996), cross-cultural instructors found culture-general information more useful in understanding more about a variety of cultures as suggested by Gudykunst (1991).

In teaching culture-general information, the approach considers general cultural characteristics in order to study difference. For example culture-general information involves among other topics the study of patterns of communication among cultures based on the concepts of context, time and space (Hall, 1959). The unit also includes the study of work by Hofstede (1980) and his seminal work on cultural dimensions explaining cultural differences on the basis of individualist/collectivist, power distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity /femininity orientations. Confucian dynamism (Hofstede & Bond, 1988) was another cultural dimension added later providing insight into the understanding Confucian cultures.

Incorporated in a culture-general approach within the class, the author also addresses ethical considerations that may confront the cross-cultural sojourner. Students are made aware and discuss concepts of utilitarianism, ethical relativism, and universalism and are called upon to make judgments as managers confronted with ethical dilemmas. Can we apply universal rules to certain behaviours? Does historical particularism allow for certain actions to be acceptable on cultural grounds regardless of how untenable certain actions may seem? Students are encouraged to think through these issues reflecting on what they consider appropriate behaviour for the given circumstance.

Case studies on ethical dilemmas enable the students to think through the issues and justify their decisions regarding a certain course of action. For example, with the issue of gift giving as part of business etiquette in Confucian societies, students have to decide what is appropriate and acceptable and what is legitimately considered to be part of accepted cultural practice. When does the gift giving move beyond the accepted cultural practice and become a bribe? Is bribery legitimate if it is seen as a cultural practice? Given the general framework for understanding ethics from a culture-general perspective the answers to some of these questions require a more in-depth culture-specific investigation.

CULTURE-SPECIFIC APPROACH

The assumption that training and education programs based on culture-general information are preferable to culture-specific based programs (Gudykunst & Hammer, 1983) has been countered by literature arguing that an integrated approach incorporating both culture-specific and culture-general information offers certain advantages. Culture-specific information helps the learner to understand how to function at the structural (family, business and government) and the situational (daily street life) level in different societies (Bennett, 1986; Broome, 1986; Milhouse, 1996).

Culture-specific information helps cross-cultural sojourners understand the socio-cultural and psycho-cultural behaviour of individuals in the country they are visiting (Milhouse, 1996). The benefits of this approach are that understanding the culture-specific values of a country enables the sojourner to engage at a level that goes beyond the culture-general information. Culture-specific information helps provide an understanding of societal mores, professional situations, workplace behaviour, and government interaction. The ability to engage with local people on this level to 'know what you are talking about' sends signals to your hosts that you have a legitimate interest in the people and their country. Networks, connections and relationships based on respect and trust are quickly formed. Personal, business and government interactions between sojourner and host and group acceptance of the outsider is enhanced when engagement can occur at this level (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994).

MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

As already stated, culture-specific knowledge refers to customs, values, and behaviours specific to a culture. Often simplified for ease of understanding they can result in a 'shopping list' of stereotypical cultural rules and norms that can overwhelm the cross-cultural sojourner providing more angst than aid (Irwin, 1996). The thematic paradigm based on concepts of work, time, space, language, suggested by Brislin et. al (1994) to help and counter the possibility of anxiety due to cultural rules overload does not go far enough in helping understand specific cultures. The thematic paradigm may help classify the amount of information to be taught about a country's culture but it does so in an ahistorical and acontextualised manner. It fails to address 'why' (Bennett, 1986) certain behaviours occur in certain countries.

In the words of the ethnographer Clifford Geertz (1973) what is being offered is a 'thin' or a non in-depth description of culture. He says...

...cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete...to get somewhere with the matter at hand is to intensify the suspicion, both your own and that of others... There are a number of ways to escape this – turning culture into folklore and collecting it, turning it into traits and counting it, turning it into institutions and classifying it, turning it into structures and toying with it. But they are escapes...(:29)

In order that a culture is understood, country specific or area specific information needs to be incorporated into culture-specific knowledge. Such information reflects an understanding of the country's history, geography, religion, cultural identity, language and communication, socio-economics, business and political environment. Through the incorporation of a multidisciplinary array of knowledge into his cross-cultural communication course the author helps provide his students with appropriate frames of reference to help them understand specific cultures and inform them why certain behaviours occur in these cultures.

According to Geertz (1973) an interpretative theory of culture requires a 'thick' description. The multidisciplinary approach seeks to encompass this 'thick' description. Arguing a broad social agenda to help inform our understanding of different cultures, Geertz goes on to say...

The danger that cultural analysis...will lose touch with the hard surfaces of life...is an ever-present one. The only defense against it...is to train such analysis on such realities and such necessities in the first place. It is thus that I have written about nationalism, about violence, about identity, about human nature, about legitimacy, about revolution, about ethnicity, about urbanization, about status, about death and most of all about peoples who place these things in some sort of comprehensible meaningful frame (p.30).

For an educator investigating and acquiring knowledge of a country's, historical, political, religious, ethnic identity, communication patterns and business environment can be a time consuming process. However, it is a beneficial one to educator and student alike. It provides context and allows for a broader base from which we can understand specific cultures. Such a process means that the cross-cultural educator needs to go beyond the culture-general information available in cross-cultural communication textbooks and seek specialist knowledge about specific cultures.

Clearly the inclusion of such information can rarely be a part of short cross-cultural training programs. Time and monetary constraints often results in a predominantly culture-general approach to training (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994). Culture-specific information in such programs tends to be no more than an indication on the part of the trainer where such knowledge in the form of books can be accessed for self-study.

Where time in a course or program allows (e.g. university courses) for the teaching of culture-specific information, then a multidisciplinary approach should be incorporated. Anecdotal evidence

from the author's own experience suggests a limited understanding among the students of the culture-specific issues involving most parts of the world. Thus the cross-cultural educator has a critical role to play in imparting such knowledge to students. If this is not possible the use of country experts to disseminate specialist country knowledge is an appropriate alternative. Where specific and unfamiliar knowledge is being taught, research suggests a didactic intellectual method of delivery such as lectures is the most appropriate method to disseminate and the most effective in allowing students to comprehend such information (Brislin & Pedersen, 1976).

In the cross-cultural communication unit administered by the author four weeks are devoted to understanding specific cultures. Cultural groupings or countries which have been instructed upon include, the Anglo World, Arab World and Islam, the Chinese, Australia, India, Malaysia, and France. France provides an interesting example of a Western country but culturally not in the Anglo fold. The author, based on the 'relevance' of that grouping or country to Australia (where the course is conducted), determines the selection of cultural groupings or countries.

For example, in trying to incorporate a multi-disciplinary approach to teaching culture-specific information on France, the author in his course seeks to inform and impart knowledge to students on a broad array of topics relevant to France. These include: French national values, the geography of France (with the use of maps), French history, republican France and the revolution, secularism and the unitary state of the nation (Hoffman, 1993), history of immigration and its cultural make-up, ethnic relations, social stratification in French society, the role of family, the role of women, societal communication patterns, intellectualism, French management, the education system and contemporary France.

Clearly to expect a detailed in-depth analysis of such a broad array of knowledge that informs our understanding of France and the French to be provided in a three-hour seminar class is not realistic. However, if we are to teach culture-specific information, students need to be extended beyond issues of work, time and space, language, roles, group versus individual, rituals and superstitions, as proposed by Brislin and Yoshida (1994). Students need to be introduced to a broader multi-disciplined knowledge that adds context to our understanding of people and helps provide answers that explain French values and behaviours.

CONCLUSION

Education and training in cross-cultural communication helps contribute to people's cross-cultural competency and awareness. It results in positive outcomes for participants and assists in people's cross-cultural skill development, adjustment and performance in foreign environments.

In the cross-cultural communication literature a discourse exists regarding the difference between cross-cultural training and education. The difference may best be categorized as a process issue reflecting a more didactic (intellectual) as distinct from an experiential approach to teaching. Courses in cross-cultural communication need to incorporate an integrative approach that addresses the need for cognitive, affective and behavioural goals. These are to be achieved through a combination of didactic (intellectual) and experiential learning coupled with course content which reflects culture-general and culture-specific information.

Despite a perception that culture-specific information is seen as the 'poorer cousin' of the culture-general information, a greater emphasis needs to be placed on the teaching of culture-specific information. Culture-specific information needs to be multi-disciplinary incorporating the teaching of a country's history, geography, religion, cultural identity, language and communication, socio-economics, business and political environment. This allows for a deeper cultural analysis and understanding that will aid the cross-cultural development of the sojourner. The importance of such information cannot be underestimated. It advances our understanding of cultures beyond the 'thin' interpretation (Geertz, 1973), helping inform 'stereotypical lists' and arming the cultural sojourner with frames of reference to further aid their cultural understanding and inquiry.

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