

**INTEGRATING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN THE TEACHING
OF CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION**

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Abstract

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Abstract

The growth in international business and trade and the resultant interaction of people of diverse cultural backgrounds have created a growing need for people to receive cross-cultural training (Black & Medenhall, 1990 p.38; Brislin & Yoshida, 1994; Tung, 1981). This provides academics with the challenge of educating and training our future business leaders in the area cross-cultural communication. This is not necessarily an easy task. Teaching cross-cultural communication requires a multi-dimensional approach, which is underpinned by three criteria: the goals, (cognitive, affective, behavioural) of the training, the material content (culture specific, culture general) and the process of instruction (intellectual, experiential) (Milhouse, 1996).

This paper will discuss the process of instruction specifically looking at the use of experiential learning in the classroom setting. Pedagogically the use of experiential exercises rests on the premise that adults learn by doing, being involved, and experiencing (Knowles, 1990). Cross-cultural communication lends itself well to experiential methods of education because for culture to be understood it ideally has to be experienced (Cheney, 2001).

The paper incorporates discussion of material, methods and techniques from the author's own experience in conducting cross-cultural communication classes. The author then reflects upon issues and challenges he faces in conducting cross-cultural communication classes to a culturally diverse group of students and offers the reader his insights as to what he sees as relevant and pertinent in the conduct of these classes.

INTEGRATING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN THE TEACHING OF CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

The global interaction of governments, corporations and citizenry is arguably more pronounced at this juncture in history than at any time in the past. Increasingly individuals need to interact both professionally and socially with people of diverse cultural backgrounds. Managers in multinational enterprises face complexities in establishing relationships when dealing in cross border transactions. To be effective in the international business environment, requires a global perspective (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1989). The impact of culture upon understanding diversity and the global perspective cannot be underestimated. It underpins the growing need for individuals to receive cross-cultural education and training (Black & Medenhall, 1990; Brislin & Yoshida, 1994; Tung, 1981).

In his report on Australian Leadership and Management Skills, Professor Karpin pointed out that Australian managers lacked global 'know-how' (Karpin, 1995). An insular myopic view coupled with a narrow international perspective was a criticism leveled at the Australian manager (Karpin, 1995). The Australian manager needs to develop a greater global focus if he is going to succeed in the future in the face of increasing global competition, deregulation and market liberalization. It is according to Karpin, the responsibility of business educators to provide the country's future managers with the education and training to enable them to engage as world-class leaders. Future managers need to be cross-culturally aware in order to interact internationally. This requires an intensive effort on the part of business educators to train and educate tomorrow leaders (1995).

It is in this context that business faculties in universities and colleges are offering students, education in cross-cultural communication. Business schools in the United States have introduced courses in cross-cultural business communication (Cheney, 2001; Varner, 2001). Similarly in Australia's tertiary sector, universities and business schools are providing their students with the opportunity to study units such as international management, inter-cultural studies and cross-cultural communication. Cross-cultural communication education refers to formal efforts made in preparing people for effective interpersonal interaction when dealing with individuals from other cultures (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994). The education and training helps contribute to people's cross-cultural competency by enabling them to develop an awareness of cultural difference (Gannon & Poon, 1997; Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, & Wiseman, 1991; Milhouse, 1996).

Educating students in cross-cultural communication requires a multidimensional approach which encapsulates three criteria: the goals of the education, the material content and the process of instruction (Milhouse, 1996). The goals are *cognitive* (providing knowledge and understanding as to similarities and differences among cultures), *affective* (enabling one to deal emotionally with a new cultural environment) and *behavioural* (entailing the acquisition of necessary skills to be able to interact cross-culturally) (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994). The material content is underpinned by *culture general* information – theories and common themes which explain different cultures and *culture specific* information – norms, customs, values, rules and behaviours specific to a culture (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994). The process of instruction entails both the *intellectual or didactic* which works at the cognitive level – lectures, discussions and student presentations and the *experiential* which allows students to learn by 'doing', through the use of role plays and simulation exercises (Bennett, 1986; Gudykunst et al., 1991).

Cross-cultural communication lends itself well to experiential methods of education because culture to be understood, ideally has to be experienced (Cheney, 2001). Culture based on the collective programming of the mind (Hofstede, 1991) suggests the sharing of 'like experiences'. 'Like experiences' can be understood through experience itself in the cultural environment in which the sojourner is to live or travel. However because accessing the cultural environment is not always possible, the educator attempts to replicate similar conditions in the classroom via simulation exercises and role plays. Such an approach moves cross-cultural communication education from an intellectual teacher-centred pursuit to a learner-centred activity based on

experiential learning (Bennett, 1986). It is in this context that the author discusses the use of experiential activity as part of the learning experience in a unit he teaches called Cross-Cultural Communication and Negotiation (CCCN). This learning experience is discussed within the framework of Kolb's Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984).

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Experiential learning is the notion of learning from experience. According to John Dewey, the 20th century's most influential educational theorist (Kolb, 1984) the education experience needs to be structured in such a way as to provide for a learner-centric experience. The responsibility of teachers and educators is to structure and organise students' experiences in the classroom so that they have positive influence on their future life experiences (Dewey, 1938). Dewey distinguished between two approaches to education, the 'traditional' and 'progressive'. The traditional experience is characterized by an education which consists of structured subject matter based on information and skills which are transmitted by teacher to the student in a didactic manner. This is in contrast to the progressive approach underpinned by a philosophy which requires a more unstructured and student directed process seeking to enmesh students' experience with education (Dewey, 1938).

David Kolb who was influenced by the work of Dewey established his own model of experiential learning and education. Experiential learning according to Kolb is "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984 p.38). The essence of experiential learning is not only classroom based. New information learned in the classroom is combined and tested with the student's real life experiences. A transformation occurs between information and life-experience leading to the acquisition of new knowledge (Kolb, 1984).

According to Kolb (1984) this transformation is underpinned by a cyclical process of four phases. The first phase of the Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984) entails the *concrete experience* based on activity and involvement in a range of activities including role plays, simulation exercises and case studies. *Reflective observation* follows; learners reflect and share what they have learned from the experience. In *abstract conceptualization* learners look at theories and identify general principles which underpin the learning experience and incorporate them in *active experimentation* where through a process of group discussion, practice and feedback, learners look to how they can apply the principles learnt, and how things may be done differently the next time.

A similar dichotomy to the Dewey 'traditional/progressive' approaches to education has permeated the discourse in the conduct of Cross-Cultural Communication (CCC) courses. Traditional approaches to cross-cultural communication education offered by universities have focused on setting topics and providing information with the aim of helping students achieve cognitive goals through didactic teaching methods such as lectures, and presentations. Such courses in the main have been devoid of any experiential learner-centred teaching such as simulation exercises, role-plays and field trips (Harrison & Hopkins, 1967).

Cross cultural communication education has moved beyond this exclusive didactic approach to incorporate exercises, simulations and role plays into cross-cultural communication classes which are experience based and underline the attainment of skills to complement the cognitive knowledge gained through didactic means (Milhouse, 1996). In a survey of 260 college courses and professional cross-cultural training programs in the U.S. Milhouse (1996) found that a majority (88%) integrated such a multidimensional approach. Such an approach provides the learner with the means to further develop their behavioural disposition while gaining, know-how and 'practical' experience to be able to operate effectively in foreign cultural environments. Pedagogically the use of experiential exercises in education rests on the premise that adults learn by doing, being involved, and experiencing (Knowles, 1990).

For the sojourner or expatriate a new overseas environment means new stimuli that need to be understood to aid their adaptation process. Unless such knowledge and skills are integrated in education through experiential activity, the sojourner may experience intensified culture shock if reliant solely on traditional didactic education programs to try and understand a culture (Harrison & Hopkins, 1967). Culture shock describes the situation of the sojourner who experiences distress as a result of being and having to interact in an unfamiliar cultural environment (Oberg, 1960). The multidimensional approach helps ameliorate the consequences of such phenomena by integrating both the didactic and experiential approaches to affect the goals and content of cross-cultural communication education (Bennett, 1986; Gudykunst & Hammer, 1983; Milhouse, 1996).

EFFECTING CROSS-CULTURAL COMPETENCY THROUGH DIDACTIC AND EXPERIENTIAL TEACHING

The experiential approach being learner-centred allows the trainee to react to situations, intellectually, emotionally and behaviourally (Gudykunst & Hammer, 1983). Gudykunst and Hammer (1983) argue that the didactic approach does not help in transforming the behaviour of those being trained or educated. It fails to take into account interpersonal factors which need to be addressed in any cross-cultural interactions and provides no real attempt to try and understand the emotional reaction of the trainee to new cultural situations.

Despite a general consensus on the importance of experiential learning in cross-cultural communication education there is no conclusive evidence as to its efficacy in providing for increased cross-cultural awareness and competency (Bennett, 1986). The experiential method of instruction is generally perceived as being superior in providing for cross-cultural competency over the didactic mode, however the evidence proves to be anecdotal (Gannon & Poon, 1997).

Earley (1987) compared didactic (area studies) and experiential (simulated interaction and field experience) methods of instruction for 80 managers preparing for overseas assignment and found that both methods were effective in improving intercultural awareness although participants preferred the experiential approach. In a similar study by Pruegger and Rogers (1994) no significant differences were found between the two methods in affecting cross cultural sensitivity although the experiential method (simulation game) did result in positive attitude change towards cultural diversity.

In a study involving 105 MBA students partaking in cross-cultural education as part of their MBA, Gannon and Poon (1997) failed to find any support for the contention that experiential training results in a higher level of cultural awareness than didactic training or education. According to Gannon and Poon (1997) the finding countered previous claims that the experiential approach was more effective in bringing about attitude change and heightened cultural awareness. Like Earley (1987) they also found a preference among students for experiential training.

A practical implication of these findings is that clearly both the experiential and didactic approaches are useful in promoting cultural awareness (Gannon & Poon, 1997). Like Gannon and Poon (1997) the author of this paper does not advocate the exclusive use of one approach over the other. Education and training in cross-cultural communication needs to compliment and accommodate both the didactic/intellectual and experiential approaches.

The remainder of this paper provides the author's insights and reflections as an educator in the use of experiential activity in the conduct of cross-cultural communication classes. Using Kolb's Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984) he highlights the learning experience of students in Cross-Cultural Communication and Negotiation (CCCN). The unit is offered to post-graduate business students in Australia and is taught in a three-hour interactive seminar class which runs for 13 weeks. The main objective of the unit is to raise student awareness and competency in cross-cultural communication. The author incorporates into the unit a multi-dimensional framework (Bennett,

1986; Gannon & Poon, 1997; Gudykunst & Hammer, 1983; Milhouse, 1996) incorporating both didactic and experiential approaches to learning.

THE LEARNING CYCLE AND THE TEACHING OF CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND NEGOTIATION

The essence of the learning experience according to Kolb (1984) is that it is cyclical with no pre-determined starting point. The educator can thus structure the sequence of phases of the learning experience in a manner which best captures the pedagogy of the instructor. In the unit administered by the author the cycle starts at the abstract conceptualization phase with lectures and presentations carried out in a didactic manner and concludes with the reflective observation after the concrete experience of a negotiation simulation exercise.

Abstract Conceptualisation

In CCCN the Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984) begins with the abstract conceptualisation phase. It is in this teacher-centred phase (Kolb, 1984) that students are introduced to new information about cultures, conceptualizing ideas, theories and examples which aid in the student's cognitive learning process. This information incorporates both culture general and culture specific information. Gudykunst and Hammer (1983) argued that the culture-general information enables students to be prepared for dealing with a broader cross section of people from a range of cultures. The approach considers a range of 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. Principles of negotiation, negotiation processes, forms of negotiation (collaborative and competitive) are taught, which help students understand the theoretical underpinnings of the experiential activity, a negotiation simulation exercise between an American and Chinese company that takes place within the course.

Culture-specific information helps students understand the socio-cultural and psycho-cultural behaviour of individuals in the country or culture they are studying (Milhouse, 1996). The benefit of this information is that understanding the culture-specific values of a country enables the student, cross-cultural traveler or 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. In preparing students for the experiential activity students are provided with culture specific information about China and the United States. Regarding China information includes an understanding of Confucianism, Taoism, interpersonal relationships and family, the concepts of guanxi and face and issues related to how the Chinese negotiate. Regarding the US the teaching incorporates a brief overview of American history, independence, the frontier ethos, American values and identity, the family and American workplace practices.

Active Experimentation

The information taught in the previous phase is used by the students to develop strategies and ideas about how they are going to approach the negotiation exercise. The new theoretical concepts, information and ideas introduced to students are clarified in class through an interactive process of asking questions and partaking in class discussions. This occurs among the students and instructor in an open discussion.

In considering the information learned in the course about China and Chinese culture, a significant number of Chinese students in the class enables non-Chinese students to seek clarification from their colleagues, in trying to understand concepts and ideas raised in class. Among the Chinese

students, discussion and 'argument' of concepts and ideas will take place as they reflect upon issues raised in the class in which they have practical experience but have rarely thought about from an academic theoretical perspective. For example, the notion of *guanxi* in Chinese culture loosely translates to connections (people you know in society that may help you in expediting matters of concern to you). Chinese students will enlighten their colleagues by providing personal examples of how such connections work and delineate the difference between *guanxi* seen as legitimate cultural practice and *guanxi* as a euphemism for corruption (Su & Littlefield, 2001).

Concrete Experience

The concrete experience - a negotiation simulation exercise puts into practice the abstract concepts learned in the classroom and delineated through active experimentation. One negotiation simulation exercise is based on the case - Albion in China (CIBER, 2001) which involves Albion an American I.T. company wanting to set up a joint venture operation in China with Chinese company - Fa Rong. The American delegation visits their Chinese counterparts in Shanghai where the negotiations take place. The negotiation seeks to resolve outstanding issues as to the final terms and conditions of the joint venture. The negotiation between Albion and Fa Rong takes place over 3 days which equates to one three hour class.

Members of the class are assigned by the instructor to either be part of the American or Chinese delegation. A large number of international students in the class including as previously mentioned a significant proportion of students from China enable negotiating teams to be formed according to cultural background. Students, three or four per negotiating team are assigned to culturally proximate groups (Western or Eastern negotiators to reflect the actual simulation exercise). Students do not play a role as such but address the issues affecting the Chinese and American delegations in the Albion case. Individuals in the negotiating exercise are encouraged to allow their cultural and natural personality predispositions to come to the fore when they are negotiating while at the same time integrating the concepts, theories and information learned in class.

The essence of the 'negotiation' is to make the activity as 'real' a learning experience as possible. For example, if students in a negotiating team speak a common language which the 'other side' may not understand then as a team they are encouraged to use it. Students are encouraged to partake in the negotiation exercise in a legitimate manner i.e. to try and internalize the case as though they are employees of the companies concerned. They are expected to negotiate 'hard' seeking the best outcome for their company. There are no predetermined outcomes to the negotiation exercise.

Reflective Observation

At the end of the negotiation students are brought together and engage in a debriefing session led by the instructor who encourages the students to reflect upon the experience. Students are encouraged to think about the learning gained as a result of the negotiation exercise and provide a report to the instructor reflecting upon some of the following issues;

- How would you describe your negotiating style?
- In the negotiation how did you view members of the other team?
- How did you handle the disagreements with the other team?
- Did you find it frustrating at times negotiating with other side? If so, why? How was this frustration resolved, if it was?
- Any aspects of culture or personality which came to the fore in the negotiation?

- You general reflection on negotiating with members of another culture. Did you find it difficult adapting to the thinking of the other team?

It is important that the debriefing moves beyond the outcome (i.e. was an agreement reached and what are its terms and conditions), to incorporate reflections, perceptions and feelings which students are experiencing at the time of the negotiation. Some of the students' reflections of the activity indicate the feelings and perceptions that arise:

Comments of students from the 'American' delegation

- "Despite the other side being Chinese (i.e. students from China) they were very direct and to the point".
- "Unfair for the Chinese to discuss in Chinese in front of us, while we can't understand them, they can understand us".
- "They had a very aggressive member in their team which I found surprising, I imagined them soft spoken and calm".

Comments of students from the 'Chinese' delegation

- "Both sides were unwavering. Never thought negotiation could be so tough. Not happy with the result (no agreement was reached) no sense of achievement".
- "Personalities were more important than cultural background".
- "They gave the perception that the Chinese couldn't be trusted – the US wanted everything in writing. This was a fixation for the Americans".
- "It is easy to get emotionally involved – we never stopped arguing".

Comments offered by students during the debriefing reflect the differing expectations and perceptions of how they "thought" the "other side" would negotiate. Often the reality does not match the pre-conceived notions of the expected behaviour of Western and Eastern negotiators. It is in this process of reflective observation that the instructor facilitates the discussion and helps students understand the problems of over reliance on cultural generalizations and the ensuing repercussions in assuming people are going act in a certain manner but act differently.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE EXPERIENTIAL ACTIVITY IN CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND NEGOTIATION

The negotiation exercise as an experiential activity proves to be important for a number of reasons. The conceptual ideas discussed in class are both reinforced and challenged as a result of the negotiation exercise. Cross-cultural education requires an informed generalized approach (Adler, 1991) in order to teach about culture. Despite 'warnings' to students about over generalizing and over reliance on stereotypical perceptions when dealing with others from different cultural backgrounds, stereotypical perceptions are difficult to erase. As the students comments above show, such experiential activities help reinforce in the minds of participants that people are first and foremost individuals with their own personality traits which may or may not fit the cultural generalization or stereotype discussed in class. As Sebenius (2002) points out, in cross-cultural analysis it is important to avoid the John Wayne v Charlie Chan fallacy, i.e. the assumption that the stereotyped individual is representative of all individuals in that national culture. Experiential activities of this nature thus enable students to adjust their conceptual maps in light of new knowledge and 'experience'.

For some students this is their first experience in 'negotiation' or the first time they have found themselves 'negotiating' with 'foreign delegations'. It provides them with the opportunity to put into 'practice' some of the conceptual theories and ideas being taught in class. For other students who study part-time and work professionally it is an opportunity to integrate into the classroom and enlighten the rest of us with some of their own personal experience from their work environment. Both processes according to Brookfield (1983) encapsulate the learning experience. The former through "experience" based activities enable a direct encounter with phenomena being studied and the latter through direct participation and reflection on occurrences in everyday life.

CONCLUSION

Education in cross-cultural communication helps increase 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. Courses in cross-cultural communication need to incorporate a multidimensional approach that addresses the need for cognitive, affective and behavioural goals. These can be achieved through culture-specific and culture general course content via a combination of didactic (intellectual) and experiential learning.

Experiential learning the idea that one learns from experience is an important aspect of the overall educative process. It reflects a learner-centred as distinct from a teacher-centred (didactic) approach to education. Despite the general view of the importance of experiential learning in cross-cultural communication the 'jury is out' as to its efficacy in bringing about greater cross-cultural competency in comparison to didactic methods of instruction. The implications of this are that one cannot advocate the exclusive use of one approach over the other. Education and training in cross-cultural communication needs to compliment and accommodate both the didactic/intellectual and experiential approaches.

This paper highlights the importance of experiential learning through the author's insights and reflections as an educator. This is achieved by discussing Cross Cultural Communication and Negotiation (a unit taught by the author) within the framework of Kolb's Learning Cycle (1984) to highlight the learning experience of students who undertake this unit. The Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984) captures the underlying essence of the instruction administered in this unit, from the didactic abstract conceptualization through to the experiential concrete experience, students can directly encounter and reflect upon the phenomena they are being taught.

Education in cross-cultural communication has as its aim cultural understanding and the development of cross-cultural competence. The importance of experiential activity should not be underestimated. As is evident from students' responses in the reflective observation phase the experiential negotiation simulation activity helps inform and clarify preconceived notions held by many. Educating individuals in cross-cultural understanding and awareness can be difficult. It is not easy to break down cultural barriers and stereotypical perceptions established over a lifetime. However it is incumbent upon educators in cross-cultural communication to play their part in helping bring about such change. The use of experiential activity helps towards this end by enabling students to adjust their cognitive maps in light of the new knowledge and 'experience' they have gained.

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