CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN THE GLOBAL CLASSROOM: ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

Teaching and learning now assumes a global classroom: one which connects with teachers and learners in a variety of locations; a classroom which is virtual as well as real; a classroom which makes cultural difference familiar. With this changing complexion of the classroom and the myriad of issues confronting both teachers and students, the importance of cross-cultural communication must not be overlooked. Cross-cultural communication has been around for a long time. The challenge is to place it in the current context of globalisation and international education as it is now framed and develop new and appropriate pedagogies and curriculum.

CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN THE GLOBAL CLASSROOM: ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to discuss the recognition and importance of effective cross-cultural communication in the global classroom. Issues confronting educators, such as learning styles; the importance of culture and cultural variables; methods of communication (both verbal and non-verbal); and, ways of teaching and learning, through the understanding of the principles of cross-cultural communication will be discussed. Finally, an examination of the manner in which these impact on educational practices in the global classroom will be considered.

Holton (1997) suggests that global issues increasingly dominate discussion on the direction of social change. The internationalisation of higher education, with students crossing international boundaries in search of learning and understanding, is not a new phenomenon. It has, however, been consolidated and promoted against a backdrop of 'globalisation'. It is both a response to and reflection of globalisation. International education and the many issues confronting it has presented a challenge to those involved in the teaching and learning of culturally diverse students within the context of the global classroom.

Of course, the question to be asked is: what does the internationalisation of higher education actually mean? While there is no simple, unique or all encompassing definition or interpretation of internationalisation of education, Knight and de Wit (1997) define it as "...the process of integrating an international/intercultural dimension in to the teaching, research and service functions of the institution." (p8). This definition encompasses four types of activities that fall with this framework: research-related activities; education-related activities; technical assistance and education cooperation; and, extra-curricular activities and institutional services.

Teaching and learning now assumes a global classroom: one which connects with teachers and learners in a variety of locations; a classroom which is virtual as well as real; a classroom which makes cultural difference familiar. With this changing complexion of the classroom and the myriad of issues confronting both teachers and students, the importance of cross-cultural communication must not be overlooked. The challenge is to place cross-cultural communication in the current context of globalisation and international education as it is now framed and develop new and appropriate pedagogies and curriculum.

ISSUES OF CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Learning Styles

All students must adjust to transitions: the possibility of being away from home or family, the experience of new responsibilities and relationships, as well as the rigours of the classroom. When students are from other countries, the stresses associated with these transitions are intensified and can be markedly acute when cultural differences are great. For example, if students face new and different languages, new and unfamiliar foods, new and strange social mores, and new and real possibilities of xenophobia, their ability to cope in the classroom is stretched. Although the world outside the classroom is a major consideration for foreign students adjusting to their new environment, it is the context of the classroom, which has the most direct impact on learning (McLoughlin, 1995).

It is this process of learning, or rather styles of learning that is one of the major problems facing international students studying in a foreign institution. Ballard (1989:42) identifies styles of learning as a major issue and describes it as resulting from "...a mismatch between previous educational experience and what is now expected." Ballard and Clanchy (1988) identified these cultural attitudes to learning as each country having its own traditions not only about what students must learn but also how they should learn. The authors, whose research is concentrated within the Australian higher education system, identify two major areas within this context: culture and the process of education and cultural confusions as work. They (1992:11) propose the question "...why should the cultural and social backgrounds of students make such a difference to the ways in which they study when enter Australian universities?"

Figure 1 (below) represents a model of the relationship between teaching and learning strategies and the cultural attitudes to knowledge that inform them.

Attitudes to knowledge: Conserving ←——————————————————————— Extending ——————→

Learning approaches: Reproductive ←——→ Analytical ←——→ Speculative

Teaching strategies	Reproductive	Analytical	Speculative
Role of Teacher	• Almost exclusive source of - knowledge - direction/guidance - assessment	• co-ordinator of learning resources • questioner, critical guide, gadfly • principal source of assessment	• more experienced colleague and collaborator • preliminary critic and adviser • patron
Characteristic Activities	• transmission of information and demonstration of skills • overt moral and social training	• analysis of information and ideas within interpretive frameworks • modelling of/demand for critical approach to knowledge and conventions	• discussion/advice on ideas and methods on individual basis • modelling of hypothetical and creative thinking • collaborative search for new ideas
Assessment	• tests of memory recall and practical demonstration of skills • emphasis on replication • geared to ranking	• assignments/exams requiring critical analysis and problem-solving • emphasis on: - originality - quality of interpretation	• independent research – thesis and papers of publishable quality • 'contribution to the field of knowledge'
Aim	• simple ('unreconstructed') transfer of knowledge and skills	• independent and critical styles of thinking • development of capacity for theory and abstraction	• development of speculative, critical intelligence • expansion of knowledge base (theory, data, techniques)

Learning Strategies	Reproductive	Analytical	Speculative
Type	• memorisation and imitation	• analytical and critical thinking	• speculating, hypothesising
Activities	• summarising, describing, identifying, and applying formulae and information	• questioning, judging, and recombining ideas and information into an argument	• research design, implementation and reporting • deliberate search for new ideas, data, explanations
Characteristic Questions	• what?	• why? How valid? How important?	• what if?
Aim	• 'correctness'	• 'simple' originality, reshaping materials into a different pattern	• 'creative' originality, totally new approach/new knowledge

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While Ballard & Clanchy presented a range of issues, the most important being the nature of the education system itself, they identified many comparable characteristics that can be found in all education systems, the difference being that some learning strategies are given more importance than others, depending on the context in which they occur (Ballard and Clanchy, 1992). By way of illustration, Australian students that are trained to analyse and critique material, to challenge the assumptions and put forth counter or opposing points of view, and students from many Asian cultures that tend to emphasise espousing knowledge and wisdom from a particular view or historical perspective, are bound to clash in the classroom if no consideration is given for these two different styles of learning. While institutions of higher education worldwide have been enrolling students from diverse national backgrounds for many years, academics have not always responded to student needs.

The Importance of Culture and Cultural Variables

The achievement of teaching and learning objectives depend on effective communication within the classroom and cross-cultural communication must be based on a genuine engagement with the cultural 'other'. Barnlund (1994) makes the point that the once engaged with another culture; it becomes a deep and complex process and that rather than remaining external to it, we must enter the world-view of those we have previously viewed as 'other'. The deeper is the level of engagement, the greater the cross-cultural effectiveness. In order to improve the quality of the learning environment within the global classroom, an appreciation of the cultural context is far-reaching. Culture, comprising ethnicity, language and religion, frames beliefs, attitudes and values, which in turn are reflected in education, legal and political systems.

Hofstede (1992:4) suggests that "...the main cultural differences among nations lie in values"...and describes culture as '*software of the mind*'. It is a form of conditioning, usually unconscious, which leaves individuals considerable autonomy to feel, think, and act within the constraints of what his or her social environment provides in terms of possible feelings, thoughts and actions.

Hofstede (1986) applied his original study of cultural differences among societies, based on research on work-related values in over 50 countries, to show cultural differences in teaching and learning with reference to the four dimensions of Individualism (the value placed on individual achievement) versus Collectivism (the value placed on harmony and 'saving face' and the well-being of the group); Power Distance Index the degree of acceptance by a society that power is unequally distributed); Uncertainty Avoidance (the extent to which people feel threatened by ambiguity); and Masculinity (the prevalence of 'masculine' values) versus Femininity (the prevalence of feminine values).

Hofstede (1986) identified differences in teacher/student and student/student interaction related to the individualism versus collectivism dimension.

Table 1

INDIVIDUALIST	COLLECTIVIST
• students expect how to learn	• students expect to learn how to do
• individual students will speak up in class in response to a general invitation by the teacher	• individual students will only speak up in class when called upon personally by the teacher
• face-consciousness is weak	• neither the teacher nor any student should ever be made to lose face
• confrontation in learning situations can be salutary; conflicts can be brought into the open (p312)	• formal harmony in learning situations should be maintained at all times

Table 2

SMALL POWER DISTANCE	LARGE POWER DISTANCE
• a teacher should respect the independence of his/her students • teacher expects students to initiate communication • students may speak up spontaneously in class • students allowed to contradict or criticize teacher	• a teacher merits the respect of his/her students • students expect teacher to initiate communication • students speak up in class only when invited by the teacher • teacher is never contradicted nor publicly criticized (p313)

Table 3

WEAK UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE	STRONG UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE
• teachers are allowed to say "I don't know" • a good teacher uses plain language • students are rewarded for innovative approaches to problem solving • teachers interpret intellectual disagreement as a stimulating exercise	• teachers are expected to have all the answers • a good teacher uses academic language • students are awarded for accuracy in problem solving • teachers interpret intellectual disagreement as personal disloyalty

Table 4

MASCULINE	FEMININE
• teachers openly praise good students • teachers use best students as the norm • students admire brilliance in teachers • students choose academic subjects in view of career opportunities	• teachers avoid openly praising students • teachers use average students as the norm • students admire friendliness in teachers • students choose academic subjects in view of intrinsic interest

Hofstede (1986) states that the above differences in teacher/student and student/student interactions are extremes: "...the situation in many countries and schools probably lies somewhere in between these extremes, and some of the differences listed may apply more in some places that in others. However, the tables are meant to alert the teachers and the students to the role differences they *may* encounter." (p311) Hofstede also suggests that not all of the differences in teacher/student interaction can be associated with one of the four dimensions as certain interaction patterns are particular to a given country or even to a given school (p313).

Powell and Andersen (1994, cited in Samovar and Porter, 1994)) highlight the importance of culture and its connection to classroom communication and a positive learning environment. Powell and Anderson (1994) found that students' learning processes are affected by culture. For example, in many eastern cultures, knowledge and insight are believed to come from reflection and meditation and students seldom disagree or ask questions of the teacher for fear of losing 'face' (p234).

Figure 2

The Communication Process
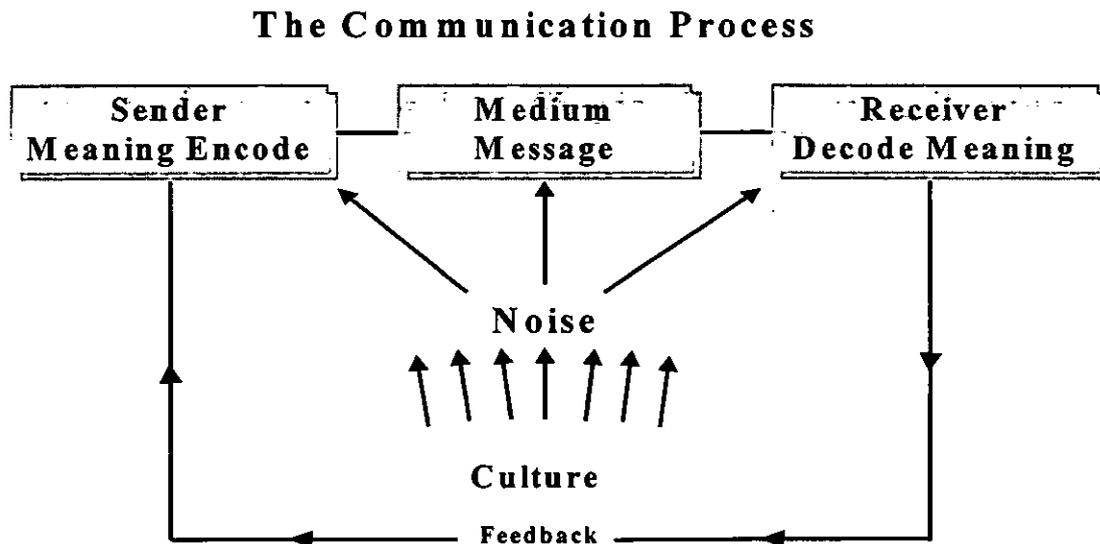
Source: Deresky, H. (2000) *Managing Across Borders and Cultures* (3rdEd.) New Jersey: Prentice Hall p140

Methods of Communication

This discussion of cross-cultural differences in learning styles may be extended to encompass differences in communication styles, as communication is central to learning. Communication can be defined as the process of sending messages through media such as words, material artefacts or behaviour, in order to arrive at shared meanings. Given the importance of time spent on communication in the classroom, it is critical that the meaning of a particular communication is interpreted according to the intentions of the sender. Deresky (2000) shows, in the above model, the communication process involves several stages during which meaning can be distorted. Anything that acts to distort or undermine communication of the intended meaning is referred to as 'noise'.

The most important point to note about noise is that its major cause is the subjectivity of each sender and receiver in the communication process. Communication can be defined as the process of sending messages through media such as words, material artefacts or behaviour, in order to arrive at share meanings. Given the importance of time spent on communication in the classroom, it is critical that the meaning of a particular communication is interpreted according to the intentions of the sender.

Individuals each exists in their own unique, private world framed largely by culture, experience, values, relations and so on. They seek to filter vast amounts of information by selectively understanding messages according to consistency with their own expectations, perceptions of reality and their values and behavioural norms. The more different the cultures of communicators, the greater the likelihood of misinterpretation and misunderstanding.

For example, Hall (1981, cited in Samovar & Porter, 1994) contends that different cultures deal differently with complex issues. The author describes this behaviour as the 'contexting' process.

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Hall (1981:62) states that this process, or framework, is divided into two communication systems: low context and high context with "...a high context communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalised in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part. A low-context communication is just the opposite: that is, the mass of information is vest in the explicit code."

For example, Australians generally are considered to be highly individualistic as a culture and are, therefore, very direct communicators. (Hofstede, 1980) That is, they tend to say what they mean. The Australian culture is also said to be a low context one in communication terms. Collectivist, higher context cultures, such as some Asian cultures, by contrast, base communication on a higher degree of shared understanding between members of the culture.

As shown in Figure 2, 'noise' in communication refers to anything that distorts communication. This takes three common forms:

Physical: This is probably the most obvious form. For example, printing that is blurred or too small on written items, etc. Such noise will distract from the message or even prevent it being received. Teachers need to consider the importance of textbooks, journal articles and other selected material from seminal books and the popular press (Porter and McKibbin, 1998). Preferred modes of communication vary across cultures. Some prefer face-to-face, others prefer written modes. Using an appropriate mode can therefore affect the way in which the message is received and interpreted.

Psychological: Refers to the emotional state and cognitive framework of the sender and receiver. Examples include anxiety/stress resulting culture shock – students finding themselves at a university without the same "cultural capital" as students from the dominant culture.

Semantic: Refers to the meaning of the language. This varies in the most obvious way when different languages are spoken. As Hofstede (1986:314) states, "...language is the vehicle of culture and it is an obstinate vehicle. Language categorizes reality according to its corresponding culture." For example, even when English is the language in common, substantial difficulties can arise in its use between, say British and Australians, Canadians and Americans and Australians and Americans.

In addition to these forms of noise, other barriers to effective cross-cultural communication include assumption of similarities; language differences; nonverbal misinterpretations; preconceptions and stereotypes; and the tendency to evaluate and make value judgements about others.

Teaching and learning

In order for effective teaching and learning to take place in the global classroom, it is imperative for both teachers and students to be aware of the 'noise' that creates barriers to effective cross-cultural communication within the context of the classroom. Being made aware of these issues, the next step is to provide strategies whereby effective teaching and learning can proceed.

Shaddock (1996:23) suggests that one of the most important strategies for establishing a positive learning environment is the importance of creating a comfortable learning environment for students "...who arrive at a university without the same "cultural capital" as students from the dominant culture, a comfortable climate in all educational settings is not simply desirable, it is a must." For example, students who participated in a project to identify how a university could change its culture in order to make it more sensitive to the needs of its international student body emphasised the importance of improved comfort levels in the classroom. These could take many forms – from teachers remembering the correct pronunciation of their names to encouraging students from all cultures to socialise through a variety of icebreakers that are designed in order that students from different cultures do not 'lose face'.

Wilson (1996) recognized the importance of clarifying teacher assumptions and expectations, as well as those of the students. The author also identified the importance of listening to the needs of students and

making all students in the classroom aware of the cultural differences that were present without being judgemental. All of these issues, along with providing appropriate learning strategies, encouraged and facilitated a positive learning environment for both cohorts of students.

Another important strategy is in reducing the language barrier. Teachers need to be aware of the difficulties caused by the use of colloquialisms, idiom, accents, etc. One also needs to speak clearly and simply and clarify meanings to ensure that both you and the student understand the message. In order to be an effective communicator, one needs to understand one's own style of communicating. One of the more difficult issues to confront is in reducing non-verbal language barriers. These take many forms, such as eye contact, facial expression, social distance, touching, etc. Being cognizant of the fact that non-verbal communication can be very different in other cultures is the first step in reducing the communication barrier.

One of the most important issues for teachers is the understanding of their own preconceptions and stereotypes of students' cultures. With this awareness, reinterpret your students' behaviour from their own cultural perspective and treat international students as you do all your students: as individuals.

Finally, teachers need to be acutely aware that cross-cultural communication generates stress in both staff and students because of insufficient time and background information and knowledge. Awareness of the stress factor in itself often heightens the motivation of both staff and students to communicate more effectively.

IMPLICATIONS OF CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Given the ever-growing presence of international students in the classroom, the above strategies highlighting the need for effective cross-cultural communication, provide teachers with some tools for effective teaching and learning conditions. Effective communication, between both teachers and students and students and other students, involves not only being able to send and receive messages, but to be able to arrive at shared meanings as a result. Cultural factors and the effective handling of cultural differences are highly important.

While there are well-recognized issues that culturally diverse students face, many of these fall out of the realm of the formal academic involvement and are addressed by a myriad of non-academic services provided by universities. However, from the academic's perspective, little will change and problems will continue to emerge until there is a significant understanding of expectations and behaviour.

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