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What is This?
Addressing Issues of Cultural Diversity in Business Communication

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The global business community makes understanding cultural differences important for business communication students, our future managers and negotiators. But discussions of cultural diversity or multiculturalism should not be limited to cultures of a foreign country only. They should also include an understanding of the diversity within one culture. This article discusses several terms used to denote cultural diversity and their implications and then provides assignments that give students experience in researching various aspects of “culture,” in exploring issues of cultural diversity, and in producing appropriate documents.

Multicultural communication, negotiation, and management, as well as other business practices, have gained significance in our global economy, easily reflected in our field’s publications (see, for example, The Journal of Business Communication, and Journal of Business and Technical Communication). The concepts, however, of cultural differences and their effects on communicating and doing business in the 1990s are complex, with several competing terms in use. In this article, I identify the terms for cultural differences and examine their implications. Then, I present two approaches to an assignment to introduce cultural issues to MBA students in business communication classes and the results of those assignments. My purpose is not only to suggest ways to incorporate an understanding of the impact of cultural differences into the business communication class but also to encourage more discussion about diversity within a focal culture and its impact on communication.

The terms multicultural and intercultural are often used in reference to the culture of another country. In Helen Sharp’s “Challenging Stu-


students to Respond to Multicultural Issues” (1995), for example, each of the two case studies asks students to consider how an American will work in another country. Another article, “Focus on Teaching: Teaching Intercultural and International Business Communication” (Johnson, 1994) points to global issues in business communication. Are we suggesting to students that multicultural situations exist only when doing business in another country or with a business from another country? Must the perception of various cultures working together within a workplace setting always refer to people from different countries working together? Or can the culturally diverse workplace refer to members of groups that have different backgrounds, customs, rituals, and acceptable behaviors and beliefs? This particular understanding of the terms may be lost on students if we do not specifically discuss them; for students, multicultural, intercultural or cultural diversity may be synonymous with international.

Terminology

In initial classroom discussions, my students use several terms interchangeably—multicultural, intercultural, cross-cultural, and cultural diversity. Perhaps they are searching for the appropriate term, or perhaps they sense a difference in meaning, or perhaps they do, indeed, intuit the synonymous relationship between these terms. They are not alone in their “confusion” about terminology. In an admittedly unscientific survey, I looked at how the presenters at the 1995 ABC Annual Convention used these terms in their abstracts. Generally, they used three of the terms—multicultural, intercultural, and cultural diversity—in a very broad sense, referring both to differences between foreign cultures and to differences within any given culture. Cross-cultural generally referred to international business relationships and was limited to differences between foreign cultures. But I also discovered presenters who did not use any of the terms per se, even though they too were addressing communication, management, and corporate issues often identified as cultural ones.

Is the terminology important? I believe, on one hand, that it is not, as long as we realize the broad range of issues involved in any one of the terms. Yet, on the other hand, I believe it is important, and for the same reason: students and instructors in academia, as well as managers, negotiators, and employees, need to be aware of the variety of
issues that come under these umbrella terms. The purpose of this article, however, is not to define or limit the use of these interchangeable terms. Instead, I want to emphasize the importance of intracultural variations to our understanding of multiculturalism.

**Cross-Cultural Variations**

An international and multicultural approach to issues in business communication seems to be what our students might call a "no-brainer." Indeed the demands on employees at all levels of American business to learn about working with companies and people from other countries make a multicultural approach necessary. Foreign companies build new plants in American cities or buy or merge with established American corporations with frequency, and these companies often include cross-cultural training, as when groups of foreign workers come to the U.S., and American workers travel to other countries for training in social customs and business practices. The assumption behind this training is clear: learning about another culture's practices will aid in effective communication and produce a more productive work environment (Beamer, 1995; Gudykunst, 1984; Samovar & Porter, 1991). But understanding cultural variations goes beyond the relationship between two foreign cultures.

**Intracultural Variations**

Cross-cultural situations cover only part of the issue. The notion of multiculturalism or cultural diversity should encourage us to acknowledge the diversity of our own country's culture. For purposes of this discussion, I call the differences among groups within a culture *intracultural variations*.

These variations may be defined by geography, gender, age, and class, as well as other variables. Southern Caucasian males, African-American inner-city youths, Caucasian suburban females, or Hispanic males, for example, have differing cultural positions within the boundaries of the U.S. culture as a whole. Best sellers on the nonfiction lists have recently included books by Deborah Tannen (1993, 1995) and John Gray (1992) who identify differences between men's and women's communication styles and meanings. Similarly, Arthur Ashe points out in his book *Days of Grace* (1993) the value system and environment of an inner-city black youth seldom conform to a Caucasian,
middle-class suburban view of the world. Environments, expectations, societies, and cultural boundaries differ in many and diverse ways. Ethnic, gender, age, social, political, religious, regional, and economic issues can all affect how specific groups respond to situations—especially situations related to work and the notion of career.

The issues related to intracultural variations have been the subject of several articles in professional writing. (Often these articles use the term cultural diversity.) In studies of gender issues in collaboration (Flynn, Savage, Penti, Brown, & White, 1991), in verbal and nonverbal communication (Griffeth, Carson, Carson, Ragan, & Wan-Huggins, 1994; Halterman, Dutkiewicz, & Halterman, 1991; Hopkins & Hopkins, 1994; Mausenhund, Timm, & King, 1995), and in workforce diversity (Beamer, 1995; Carson, Carson & Irwin, 1995; Kossek & Zonia, 1994; Limaye, 1994), research reveals that intracultural variations among workers can lead to difficulties if the diversity is ignored. Acceptable or expected behaviors in one culture may not be acceptable in others or in the workplace culture, a place in which different cultures may clash.

Consider the concept of the organizational culture. Organizations can be adversely affected when managers and other personnel fail to recognize that changes in the makeup of the workforce will likely change the dynamics of the workplace. A study of one urban transportation agency revealed that the demographic changes in the workforce resulted in a corresponding change in the organizational culture (Zak, 1994). The core group of Caucasian males felt displaced by the influx of women and minorities:

> The range of personal meaning employees brought to the workplace based on their interpretations and experiences were widely disparate. Differences in cultural background were exacerbated by class and cultural antagonisms in the community and by the climate of economic scarcity that magnified the fear of displacement among members of the original work force, as well as among newcomers. (p. 295)

Zak finds that even the notion of organizational culture is at risk in a system in which shared meanings are imposed by authority, not negotiated. Shared meaning is likely unsuccessful without the acknowledgment of intracultural variations and discourse communities.
Assignments

How can we discuss cultural diversity/multiculturalism, including the significance of intracultural identities, within the boundaries of the business communication course? In the same way students identify how organizational cultures influence the workplace or how different foreign cultures affect business practices, they can consider how various intracultural groups within an organization affect business settings and workplace environments. The difficulty, of course, is developing the ability to recognize cultural variations when one has limited multicultural experience. How would someone know, suspect, or even guess that matters of gestures, greetings, and leg crossings might fuel cultural sensitivities and faux pas? The answer lies with us—as instructors of communication—to educate students about the range of potential conflicts and then arm them with tools for research and investigation.

As a part of a graduate business communication course, I have asked students to research issues in multiculturalism, both intercultural and intracultural variations. The requirements included not only secondary research but also interviews, surveys, and observations when appropriate and feasible. I have taken two different approaches to the focus of the assignment. The first emphasized international cultures (see Appendix 1) and the second, and more successful, intracultural issues (Appendix 2).

The series of assignments in this research project accounted for 15% of the semester grade and included an initial memo outlining each student's area of interest, an oral presentation, a written document, and a self-assessment memo. The oral presentation had to be 4-5 minutes and include the use of visuals. Assignment 2 also required students to share their references in a handout. The form of the written document was open—traditional business reports or proposals were options—but the students were asked to focus on the effect and significance of cultural issues on business practices and/or communication. This assignment's oral presentation, on the other hand, could discuss any aspect of the student's research.

Assignment 1 asks the students to research another country, its cultural behaviors and practices—politics, religions, and traditions, for example—as well as its business practices. The students were to consider how those factors may affect business practices and determine
what might be necessary for U.S. companies and their employees to know before doing business. Assignment 2 asks them to consider issues significant in a culturally diverse setting and explore one issue either within a culture or in relationship to another culture. For both assignments, the students, after some preliminary research, write an initial memo expressing their ideas prior to a conference with me. In the case of Assignment 2, I placed several texts on reserve (see bibliography) to provide them with some of the issues being addressed.

**Responses to Assignment**

**Documents Produced in Response to Assignment 1**

- Policy and procedures manual for legal entry into New Zealand.
  
  One student created a policy manual to discuss the regulations and applications for permits, visas, temporary employment and permanent entry, and the importation and exportation of personal assets. The audience consisted of employees who are being relocated to New Zealand.

- Brochures about a (fictionalized) conference in Ghana sponsored by the Cocoa Manufacturers (a fictitious organization) and also about Accra, site of the conference, as well as a cover letter for conference participants. After discovering the importance of cocoa to the economy of Ghana, another student developed a packet of materials for a conference called Cocoa '95. She created a program for the conference with appropriately titled sessions, included a cover letter addressed to an attendee, provided a map, and produced a brochure about the city of Accra, including tourist information and attractions and some facts about the country.

- Report on the advisability of doing business in Mexico for North Carolina businesses; research included The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Targeting North Carolina businesses, this formal report proposed ways the NAFTA agreement could benefit North Carolina and discussed potential exports to Mexico.

- Series of posters to help employees understand German business culture and practices. This series of posters was designed to educate and inform employees who would be traveling to Germany and meeting with German business professionals. The posters dealt with rules and information about behavior, dress, greeting others socially and in business situations, and taboos.
Documents produced in response to Assignment 2

- Handbook of military protocol for the civilian worker on an Air Force base. Many civilians work on or visit military bases. Military protocol and regulations, well-known to military personnel, must be followed even by civilians. This particular brochure introduces some basic rules about visiting and driving on an Air force base, providing information about facilities on and off limits to nonmilitary personnel and regulations that even civilians must follow. It also provides numbers to call for security and information.

- Proposal for a seminar about working with different cultures, as well as communicating and negotiating in the workplace. This seminar for company employees is designed to present the communication and interpersonal behaviors of three different cultures—American, Chinese, and Hispanic—in order for these groups to understand the expectations and conventions of the others.

- Report on the World Conference on Women of late 1995 in China and the issues that face women throughout the world. This report focused on several of the issues that were discussed at the World Conference and described how the issues of importance to women differ from country to country. The report targeted business women in the U.S. who need to be aware of these differing agendas and the commitments the government has made to support women both at home and abroad.

Results and Reflections

As a result of these assignments, my students and I have learned not only about other cultures but about intracultural variations that exist in our own culture. Students have explored European, Asian, African, and South American countries, as well as New Zealand and our NAFTA partners, Mexico and Canada. Their research has looked at social, political, and religious views as well as other cultural issues that impact business practices. Students have researched negotiation and communication in business meetings and the expectations and behaviors of the business persons from another country. And they have judged the advisability of doing business with a company from another country, investing in a foreign business, or opening a business in another country. In addition, the success and significance of these
assignments have been heightened by several foreign students who have discussed and compared their own backgrounds and cultures to the U. S. My students and I have had first-hand looks at France, Belgium, Uzbekistan, China, Jordan, and Japan.

Positive things occurred through these assignments. Several students, full-time professionals, worked for companies that were becoming interested in, or were already involved in, international business, and they used the opportunity to help themselves at work. Several of the students in the night class doing Assignment 1 brought food samples, introducing some new tastes and smells to many of the students. The research by many of the students was quite comprehensive and included resources from the Internet and World Wide Web, as well as several interviews with foreign exchange students and nonnative citizens. The oral presentations prompted some interesting class discussions. One talk about gender-specific communication styles and another on the ways men and women collaborate both led to lively discussions, with sometimes defensive, but always good-natured, questions and responses.

I will be doing this assignment again and will continue to reassess what is effective. I would again begin the oral presentations about midterm and hear only two per class. Having them all at the end can be tedious (for both instructors and students) and allows little time for discussion. I would place more emphasis on the written communication styles especially when discussing foreign cultures. And I believe my second assignment was better not only because it introduced intracultural issues into the mix but also because it allowed students more options for choosing issues and cultures to explore. Finally, I will spend more time at the beginning of the process discussing what intercultural experiences and expectations they have, giving them a better sense of direction in their own research.

With this research and writing experience, my students have recognized that American business personnel who are engaged in intercultural negotiation must be aware of a culture’s effect on business practices. But they have also learned that working in culturally diverse workplaces may have its own set of communication and management problems. Business is practiced within a cultural context, and understanding that context—whether here or in another country—is crucial to a successful business. And, in turn, educating future managers and
business people about these issues is one responsibility of their instructors.

References


Reference Books for Multicultural Research Assignment


Appendixes follow on pp. 29-30.
Appendix

Assignment 1

Because of the increasing amount of activity in international markets, an understanding of different cultures and their practices is necessary for doing business. Your assignment is to research various aspects of another country's culture and report on them both orally to the class and in writing to an appropriate individual. Your audience may be, for example, a supervisor who is considering a contract with a foreign company, an owner who may want to buy or merge with a foreign-based company, or employees who are being relocated.

Some of the factors you will want to consider are

- communication/language
- religious practices
- nonverbal language and behaviors
- social practices
- organizational/governmental politics
- financial and investment practices
- negotiation and other business practices

You may choose any country you wish, pending my approval. Students researching the same country should meet prior to the oral presentations to avoid repetition.

Requirements

For this assignment, you will give an oral presentation discussing the culture of the country you have selected and potential consequences for business practices, as well as a written document that reflects your understanding of some of the business practices and interests of the country.

For the oral presentation, you must address the class for 4-5 minutes and include visuals, such as transparencies or handouts. Be prepared for a question-answer session to follow. These oral presentations are scheduled for several class meetings at the end of the semester.

The written document is due ______ and may take any of a number of forms. You can be creative or use a typical business format. Some suggestions:

- a brochure for individuals negotiating with an international company
- a report of the research including a recommendation for doing (or not doing) business in another country
- policy and procedures for doing business in a country
- informational report on a country's business practices

These as well as other possibilities would complete the written part of the assignment. We will be conferencing at a later date to determine the best approach for you.
Assignment 2

An understanding of different cultures and their societies is necessary for doing business. Knowledge of other cultures and sensitivity to issues of importance to other groups is necessary in the today’s workplace. Your assignment is to research one issue and report on it both orally to the class and in writing to an appropriate audience. This audience may be an individual who will be making a decision and needs your research, or peers who are affected by cultural factors at work.

Some of the issues you will want to consider are:
- communication/language
- religious practices
- nonverbal language and behaviors
- interpersonal relationships
- organizational/governmental politics
- gender
- negotiation

To narrow the topic sufficiently, you may need to concentrate on one particular country or culture. I will be conferencing with you to help you choose an appropriate topic.

Requirements

For this assignment, you will give an oral presentation outlining the issue and its potential consequences for business practices, as well as a written document that provides detailed information about some aspect of the issue.

For the oral presentation, you must address the class for 5-7 minutes and include visuals. Be prepared for a question-answer session to follow.

Also, you must provide a handout—a bibliography of at least 6 sources (may be interviews as well as secondary sources). These oral presentations begin with two each day.

The written document is due and may take any number of forms. You can be creative or use a traditional business format. Some suggestions:
- a brochure for individuals negotiating with an international company
- a proposal to enhance communication or cultural understanding in the workplace
- policy and procedures for doing business
- informational report on a country’s business practices

These and other ideas, that you may discuss in our conference for my approval, would complete the written part of the assignment.