

Title of example of practice: Intercultural communication: adding cognitive and experiential dimensions

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Institution and initiating department/faculty

(i.e. where example of practice takes/took place):

University of Southern Denmark, Department of Business and Foreign Languages

Departments/faculties in which initiative implemented/to be implemented:

Department of Business and Foreign Languages

Abstract

(QA question: What are/were you trying to do?)

This example of practice is situated in the multicultural classroom and emphasises issues of didactic method and means of assessment. When taught as an independent course in Denmark, be this part of foreign language degrees or combined business and foreign language degrees, intercultural communication tends to focus mainly on knowledge of theories of communication and culture. There seems to be less concern with intercultural communication as competence. In this example of practice, involving a course taught in the third year as part of a joint bachelor degree in economics and English, the teacher tried to move away from this knowledge-only conceptualisation of intercultural communication to include the dimensions of attitude and skills. Through the use of more varied didactic methods, it was hoped to help students understand that encountering the other unavoidably entails encountering the self.

Background – contextual issues giving rise to the initiative

(QA questions: Why are/were you trying to do it? / What are/were the aims and objectives?)

When teaching courses in intercultural communication, the teacher observed that students were able to discuss theories of intercultural communication, but were unable to apply these to their own intercultural contexts. For example, in one instance, the classroom was multicultural, in terms of national background, ethnic origins and gender, but students did not attempt to cross group boundaries, preferring to interact within their own in-groups. This meant that Danish students oriented to other Danish students, international students oriented to other international students, 'ethnic' Danes oriented to other 'ethnic' Danes etc.

The aim through the use of alternative didactic methods was to create opportunities for intercultural learning in the classroom by making salient students' own cognitive and affective filters, that is to say making students aware of their knowledge about themselves and others, and of the relationship between knowledge and affect/emotion, i.e. that belief can mediate the emotional response to an intercultural event.

Description of activity or initiative

(QA question: How is/was the activity/initiative implemented?)

The didactic methods that were used were aimed at questioning the three main pillars of intercultural communication theories: the 'other', communication and culture. In relation to the 'other', students were assigned into multicultural groups that were changed throughout the course; they were given interactional data from a multicultural workplace and were asked to first analyse the data in terms of ascription of identity and otherness, and then reflect on how identities are ascribed onto them in their daily lives. In relation to communication, well-known communication models in intercultural communication (such as the transmission model, meaning negotiation models) were questioned in respect of their assumptions about intersubjective meaning, understanding and conflict. For instance, there is a tendency to assume in these models that in-group communication is by default effortless and free of misunderstanding. To question these models, experimental techniques were used; these were based on Michael Reddy's (1979) toolmakers paradigm which questions the conceptualisation of language as a code for the transfer of meaning. For example, pairs of students, who shared similar cultural and ethnic identities, were given an image description task where one student described an image for his/her partner who could not see the image and then this student was asked to report on the mental image evoked by the verbal description. The experiment aims to test the idea of 'fusion of horizons' as necessary for successful communication, showing the disparities in communication even between people from same culture backgrounds. In relation to culture, students were asked to perform simulations that elicited stereotypes of same and other cultural groups, the aim being to raise awareness about how ethnocentrism functions in their own daily perceptions. Much of the literature having to do with intercultural communication, including manual style texts, summarize their perspectives and strategies for approaching cultural differences by suggesting that in the end intercultural communication is about respect and keeping an open mind. However, the didactic methods used in class attempted to demonstrate that individual perception of even these are culturally shaped and influenced, which was demonstrated through an exercise on trust.

Evaluative comments

(QA questions: What are/were the outcomes? What is/was the impact? Is/was the activity/initiative successful? How do you know whether or not it works/worked?)

It was clear that the majority of students enjoyed the activities of the course. They attended classes regularly; they performed simulations with enthusiasm; they were more verbal in class, meaning that their use of the foreign language, i.e. English, increased; they revealed more to each other about their own national, ethnic or regional identities. Observations from the classroom, and also during coffee breaks, revealed changes in behaviour in terms of greater interaction between different cultural groups, which included international students, as the course progressed. However, there was an incident when students left the classroom during the coffee break apparently because there were to be simulations after the break. This apparent negative event was turned positively around in discussions after the performances when notions of discomfort and ambiguity with new or anxiety-provoking situations (which presumably lay behind the observed student behaviour) could be given an authentic context. Nonetheless, it needs to be borne in mind that not all students are willing to participate in simulations due to a sense of vulnerability or what might be termed 'classroom culture shock'. This presents a pedagogical challenge in relation to learning styles (as opposed to teaching methods) that should not be underestimated. In evaluations of the course, the students reported successful learning. It would seem that the students had acquired a more critical understanding of the complexities of intercultural communication and an awareness of the beliefs and values of themselves and others, which they could apply to real and simulated intercultural contexts. However, one concern was the mismatch between these activities and the summative assessment, i.e. the final evaluation. The current assessment for the course is an essay examination and this is not entirely suitable as an indicator of success. The form of the summative assessment is predetermined by course regulations, which cannot be changed by the individual teacher, but involves a bureaucratic process which operates with its own time schedules.

However, more students passed the examination than the previous year, although whether this was due to the alternative didactic methods is difficult to ascertain.

Advice to others

In planning activities, it is fruitful to think beyond national cultures as the sole definition of the 'other' given the increasing recognition that identity is shaped by a myriad of interrelating factors of which national culture is but one.

Reflection/any other comments

QA question: Is/was that the best way to do it? Why/why not? What improvements or adjustments are needed?

When implementing new didactic methods, it is clear that means of assessment must also be considered. Given the nature of the Danish system, it was not possible to change the course regulations for assessment in relation to the course as taught. At the moment, the summative assessment, i.e. the final evaluation, is a 3-hour written examination in which the students must write an essay in English. A more appropriate summative assessment method would be in alignment with the teaching in the course; for instance, students could be given a simulation task to perform and then asked to reflect on and analyse their own performance in relation to their approach to the other. Formative assessment, i.e. instructor feedback and student reflection during the learning process, currently is in the form of student group presentations in class. As such this is a test of knowledge of theory. An alternative means of formative assessment, which is planned for the next time the course is taught, is the journal, where students will be asked to keep a record of their learning experiences in relation to their own behaviour and thinking in and outside the classroom. The aim is to put the individual student in focus, encouraging reflection on the self as opposed to the other.

It is also planned to make more salient the meta aspects of learning as a transitional experience, matching this to the meta cognition involved in acquiring and refining intercultural communicative competence.

Further details

e.g. web links; relevant references/publications; alternative contact names

Adler, P.S. 1975. The Transitional Experience: An Alternative View of Culture Shock. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*. Vol. 15. No. 4. 13-23.

Doney, Patricia M. and Joseph P. Cannon, Michael R. Mullen. 1998. Understanding the Influence of National Culture on the Development of Trust. *The Academy of Management Review*. Vol. 23. No. 3. 601-620.

globalEDGE. For exercises and simulations, see **globalEDGE** (a resource site for international business management) <http://globaledge.msu.edu/academy/exercisessimulations/>

Pedelty, Mark. 2001. Self as other: An intercultural performance exercise. *Multicultural Education*. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3935/is_200104/ai_n8937001/

Reddy, Michael J. 1993. The Conduit Metaphor: A Case of Frame Conflict in Our Language about Language. In Andrew Ortony, ed. *Metaphor and Thought* (First publ. 1979). (2nd ed.) Cambridge: Cambridge Press. 164-201.