

It All Begins with You: A Role Playing Application for Analyzing Intercultural Communication

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Abstract

This article aims to contribute to literature by describing how collaborative learning can be used in Business Communication courses at universities to teach learners about culture as it relates to Intercultural Communication. The author discusses how role playing cultural scenarios develop skills and lessen knowledge gaps about culture. Ethnographic research methods were applied to capture learners' experiences while training to develop cultural knowledge and cultural competency in terms of understanding and applying Intercultural Communication. These experiences were analyzed using data such as personal observations, analyses of documents, and presentations. Results of this exploratory study indicated positive learner outcomes related to developing cultural knowledge and cultural competency via engaging training methods. Viewed through the lens of closing the gap between theory and practice, results provide evidence that support a longitudinal study focusing on developing pedagogical strategies that equip learners with the necessary knowledge and skills to improve Intercultural Communication.

Keywords: business communication, intercultural communication, cultural knowledge, cultural competency, experiential learning, role playing, teamwork skills, reality-based training

1. Introduction

The global marketplace requires business leaders to adopt practices and communication styles that promote successful transactions. Given the diverse labor force, a practical starting point is to develop an understanding of other cultures – behaviors and methods of conducting business in the specific economy. For example, it is customary within American business settings that the expression “time is money” means a “speedy” transaction in a short period of time. This can differ given cultural orientations toward time. In China given the propensity for “patience” which typically requires more time during a transaction, the expression might be perceived as impolite (Varner & Beamer, 2011; Artiz & Walker, 2010; Neuliep, 2009; Jamerson, 2007; Fernandez & Underwood, 2006; Hofstede, 2001; Levine & Norenzayan, 1999; Hofstede, 1984). To this point, it is advantageous for business professionals to learn about time interpretations from the perspectives of polychronic cultures, a culture that has a relaxed attitude toward time and punctuality, and monochronic cultures, a culture that values punctuality and efficiency (White et al., 2011; Reynolds & Valentine, 2011; ITIM, 2009; Hurn, 2007; Morrison, 2000). A best practice from industry is the use of internal training programs or external consultants to orient employees about other cultures (Caligiuri et al., 2001; IBM, 2009; Kline, 2010; Nissan, 2011). Most business leaders recognize the importance of preparing and equipping employees with cultural knowledge and skills to work in the global marketplace.

Similarly, academicians understand the need for business majors to have theoretical and practical experiences aimed at developing cultural competency. In this article, cultural competency is defined as an awareness of cultural differences that affect communication and the ability to adapt communication styles, which facilitates effective communication. This involves a combination of attitude, knowledge, and skills (Varner & Beamer, 2011; Martin & Chaney, 2009; Moran et al., 2007; Novinger, 2001). In using this definition, the intent is to contribute to adaptable pedagogy related to developing Intercultural Communication.

The goal is to posit that we seek first to understand, then be understood (Covey, 1990). The objective is to focus on the relevance of understanding one's own culture that is also comprised of subcultures that differ widely. Of interest to the author, a practitioner researcher, is to apply Ethnographic methods that yield contextual meaning from practical experiences. Practitioners with first-hand experience in matters of expertise are more believable and credible than those who have merely read and thought about such experiences. Without these experiences upon which to draw, a practitioner might misinterpret or misread culture in terms of Intercultural Communication. Thus, the aim is to provide practical experiences from which business majors might perceive as viable in developing cultural intelligence – ability to use reasoning and observation skills to interpret unfamiliar gestures and situations and devise appropriate behaviors (Ang et al., 2011; Earley & Ang, 2003).

In developing practitioners from an academic perspective, Du-Babcock (2006) found in a longitudinal study related to closing the gap between theory and practice, teaching business communication *theory* and models without associated application materials is inadequate and will lead to learners not being capable of applying communication skills in the future. Additionally, related literature suggests development of such skills are essential given the culturally diverse marketplace (Varner & Beamer, 2011; Chaney & Martin, 2011; Cardon & Marshall, 2010; Martin & Chaney, 2009; Fernandez & Underwood, 2006; Earley & Mosakowski, 2004; Thomas & Inkson, 2004; Elbert et al., 2003; Arai et al., 2001; Berlak, 1999; Padilla, 1994; Collins, 1991). These findings suggest using pedagogical approaches which enables learning to occur when learners focus their attention, energies, and abilities on solving real world problems and reflect on their experiences (Dewey, 1938/1997).

One approach often suggested for the classroom is Experiential learning, often referred to as Active/Action learning because it engages learning through experiences, which tends to develop higher level thinking skills and promote learner-led activities. Instructional activities involve “learning by doing” - applying theory and thinking about the process (Salas et al., 2010; Braxton et al., 2000; Bonwell & Eison, 1991). This can include, but is not limited to role play exercises, simulations, or collaborative work on group projects. Role play and simulation are sometimes used interchangeably, because role play can sometimes be included in the simulation thus the term role playing simulation. Generally applied, both applications allow learners to practice course content via a scripted or unscripted problem or situation by assuming roles and demonstrating how to manage the situation. Applications can include individual or team demonstrations of correct or incorrect practices which allow for observation, reflection, discussion, feedback and debriefing during and after the activities (Wurdinger & Carlson, 2010; Locker & Kaczmarek, 2010; Hoover et al., 2010; O'Neil & Marsick, 2007; Raelin, 2006; Kolb, 1984).

These interactions build self-esteem in learners, promote learner-lead interactions and instill familiarity that promotes a positive attitude toward the subject matter (Sriniva, 2010). People who help each other and who join forces to achieve a common goal will generally grow to feel more positive about each other and will be willing and able to interact constructively when performing a collective task (Raelin & Coghlan, 2006; Braxton et al., 2000; Sharan, 1985, p. 255). Learners engaging in these interactions “experience” industry practices that suggest managers learn from each other and enhance “knowledge” through interactions and shared experiences. The key to training is establishing an open and safe climate (Thill & Bovee, 2011; O'Rourke, 2010; Connerley & Pedersen, 2005; Aguilar & Woo, 2000; Revans, 1983).

Creating such a climate is often challenging because individuals lack understanding of “their own” cultural identity within a diverse workplace. Modeling an approach suggested for the classroom, companies such as GE and Johnson & Johnson use action-learning teams as part of their management development programs (Solomon et al., 2012, p. 274; humtech.com). Action learning is viewed as a management development training approach that focuses on real world problems on actual work projects. Action learning allows trainees to work together on teams to analyze real-time corporate problems that extend beyond their areas of expertise. Although related literature points to the need for cultural awareness in terms of effective interaction in a culturally diverse workplace, training to develop such understanding is often not viewed as an organizational priority (Kwintessential/Cross Cultural Business Blunders and Results of Poor Cross Cultural Awareness; Chaney & Martin, 2011; Fenner, 2009; Chang, 2009; Deng & Gibson, 2009; Puck et al., 2008; Berger, 2008; Celaya & Swift, 2006; Sadri & Tran, 2002; Zane, 2002; Vaughn, 1998).

These findings underpin literature and accreditation recommendations that focus on bridging the gaps between theory and practice. In brief, the literature suggests there may be disconnect between how business programs prepare learners and what industry expects (Argenti, 2007; Smart & Csapo, 2007; Gotz et al., 2008; Bell, 2009; Sapp & Zhang, 2009; Hoover et al., 2010; Yu, 2010; AACSB, 2003, 2007, 2011).

So, to bridge the gap between *theory* and *practice* in an investigative nature, a method of preparing learners with reality-based practices was examined.

2. Design of Study

The purpose of this exploratory study was to contribute to literature substantiating agreement or a gap between academic and business professionals regarding methods that can be useful in helping business majors develop cultural competency in terms of Intercultural Communication. The study investigated: Does reality based training at the college level affect business majors' skill development and knowledge about cultural competency?

The sample population of this study was enrolled in a one semester Business Communication class. The topic of culture was integrated throughout course content via a variety of topics that describe challenges and approaches to effectively communicate across cultures. These 30 business majors included: ages ranging 21-58, 17 women/13 men, 1 graduate/29 seeking a bachelor's degree, 25 nontraditional learners working 40 hours or more aspiring career opportunities/ 5 traditional learners without work experience. Of the 30 participants, about 12 indicated participating in workplace training related to culture/diversity.

3. Applications

3.1 Preparation

Learners received two weeks of course activities on culture. These activities included: *reading* course material related to cultural topics such as- culture and communication, cultural differences, stereotypes, etc. and *discussions* (traditional, learner led and business practitioners). Learners were required to review websites related to "their own" culture.

These activities were designed for learners to focus on "their own" culture and develop an understanding of other cultures. Learners completed a short writing assignment about "their own" culture. They were also required to complete short writing exercises during in class activities. This included identifying similarities and differences of "their own" culture in comparison to the specific culture under review.

3.2 The Role Play and Simulations

Role plays were used to help learners enhance their understanding about "their own" culture before examining a scenario within a team role play exercise. Learners identified key characteristics related to "their" culture. A pair share format (two learners from different cultures) was used for the role plays. Learners were required to develop a short script that demonstrated correct behaviors of how "their" culture acts. This script included a description of the workplace scene for the audience before the demonstration which included "cultural deconstruct pauses" on key takeaways, and afterwards both members discussing "their" cultural experiences. Members in the audience were noting observers.

Learners were then assigned to "mixed" culture teams with instructions to develop a script using data from course activities with "incorrect or typical stereotypes" of cultures. Learners were instructed to assume a role different from "their own" culture. The script had to include elements used in the pair-share. The preparation period included reminders from the instructor about the importance of clarifying each actors portrayal of the "incorrect or typical stereotypes" to circumvent negative reactions from members in the audience. For training purposes, this method was used to improve learners' perceptions of an "open and safe climate." The applications provided rich contextual experiences for learners useful for applying Intercultural Communication skills in a culturally diverse group. The applications also provided data to discuss - Does reality based training at the college level affect business majors' skill development and knowledge about cultural competency?

4. Findings

The participants of this study expressed their experiences to be "meaningful and reality-based" in preparing them to be "culturally competent." An excerpt from literature is used to summarize findings - "As you think about your own culture, you begin to sense that it represents one way –and not the only way- to believe and to do things. This understanding is essential to communicate successfully with people who believe and do things differently" (Krizan et al., 2008, p. 44).

Participants in the study were actively engaged in developing their understanding of culture – “their own” and others. Learners were debriefed at the end of each application and at the end of the course; results of these discussions showed 100% of participants perceived the applications as meaningful and improved their understanding of cultures. All of the employed participants indicated that the information was shared or planned to be shared at work. This could be because several learners reported having experiences with workplace training related to culture/diversity. These experiences were useful in that some participants used workplace materials when developing their scripts for the role plays. Participants commented that the role plays and simulations helped to establish a better understanding and/or extended their understanding of the need to bridge the gap between *theory* and *practice* in terms of knowledge and skills needed to perform business processes.

Self-reported excerpts from participants are provided below about how this training affected their skill development and knowledge about cultural competency.

4.1 Theme 1 (Prompt) - Who Do You Think You Are?

I thought talking about my *own culture* would be a waste of time. I was wrong! I realized there is a difference between how one view their own culture in comparison to other cultures. It can be most surprising! The best takeaways was learning how to adapt to other cultures. Surprisingly, this included *learning how to use these techniques within my own culture*.

My experience with other cultures at work is challenging, we have so many dos and don'ts. The in class role playing activities were “fun” and “easy” and helped me to understand how to ask questions about these dos and don'ts in a comfortable manner. This included relaxing and sharing about my own cultures. The best day in class was presenting my *role playing scenario – a conversation with two faces/cultures. I am biracial* and after talking with my professor; we agreed my presentation idea would demonstrate *another unique aspect of culture*.

The individual role plays and team simulations were excellent learning experiences. I learned at least *five new things about my own culture*. Go figure (LOL)

The most *amazing takeaways from this experience was the knowledge gained about my culture from a business perspective*. I do not have work experience or experience working with other cultures. So, these activities helped me to understand appropriate workplace conversation, but even more important the hidden pitfalls of nonverbal communication. I enjoyed coming to work/performing in this class. The compare/contrast culture activities helped with understanding what to expect and how to apply Intercultural Communication in a business setting.

The takeaway worthy of an “Oscar” was the professor’s willingness to role play. This proved to be an encourager for me and others with stage fears. It also *helped me to identify characteristics linked to my high-context culture*. My experiences in the workplace involving training have been hierarchical with the manager not participating in the sessions or a hired consultant pointing out incorrect practices.

4.2 Theme 2 (Prompt) -Theory to Practice

As a post-baccalaureate student and current business manager, I welcomed the role of team leader when developing the script for the simulation. I encouraged my team to develop a script showing how a *season business professional can blunder when traveling abroad*. I have seven years of experience with my organization and rely heavily on pre travel orientation to other countries; yet, still blunder during cultural exchanges. I shared these experiences and invited two members from my work team to talk in class about our experiences. I wanted my team and class members to understand the importance of knowing how to manage a faux pas.

Developing the scripts for both the role play and simulation helped me to practice writing and presenting logically based on applying critical features of the assignments. This included use of peer critiques and team writings which provided additional experiences working with cultures beyond the acting. For example, given my teams work schedule we used electronic communications to keep the project moving. This was rewarding because it became our team presentation and best takeaway. Knowing *how a work team should communicate electronically with other cultures as well as face/face; especially, writing country/culturally specific emails* is relevance for all business professionals.

After researching faux pas associated with business etiquette, our team decided to demonstrate typical business practices, e.g. greetings, tipping, dining practices, with commonly made mistakes.

The preparation time allotted for the simulation allowed our culturally diverse team to use examples from the class activities often overlooked that can be detrimental in the workplace. *My favorite takeaway from the simulation was the part of the skit that showed accepted consumptions (alcohol, coffee, tea, etc.) during the workday. It was interesting to see how many countries/cultures which view this as a “team builder.”*

The best take away from the simulation was writing in a culturally diverse team. Our team ranged four countries – Nigeria, China, United States and Mexico. We all had previous work experiences in our countries. So, *we showed how country specific slang and jargon can be confusing even among our team members.*

The team simulation helped to develop my cultural intelligence. *The best takeaway was my knowledge gained about the importance of understanding cross cultural work teams, especially, how to build trust across cultures.* This information will help me in my future workplace.

5. Discussion

Based on analyses –personal observations, analyses of documents, and presentations - using Ethnographic research methods, the author concluded use of role plays and simulations are engaging methods to equip learners with knowledge when training about cultural competency. Arguably, a one semester course and the limited number of participants in this study should be factored in terms of determining the effectiveness in developing cultural competency. However, the participants in this study found their “experiences to be meaningful in terms of personal and professional understanding of cultures.” The knowledge they gained will help when applying elements of Business Communication related to Intercultural Communication, in particular the role of understanding one’s own culture in relation to learning and working with members of other cultures. This is important for several reasons - especially useful for addressing business leaders’ concerns about equipping learners with industry expected skills.

Because this study applied Ethnographic research methods –a number of skills can be identified from the above self-reported excerpts from participants. Examples include – culture/diversity skills, written communication skills, oral communication skills, teamwork skills, critical thinking skills, and creativity skills. In terms of a longitudinal study, these skills provides data useful for compiling a master list - themes - to better understand cultural knowledge and improve cultural competency. Analyses contribute to literature about adaptable pedagogy related to developing Intercultural Communication. Theoretically, it extends knowledge about how Experiential learning can be applied to improve practical insight.

As a practitioner professor, one of my roles includes focusing on developing pedagogical strategies, training materials and methods which enable learners to identify, adapt and apply correct business processes. This study suggests a need for further study focusing on cultural training. Hence, the author plans to use these findings to propose a longitudinal study about developing cultural competency with a larger number of participants. The goal is to provide insight on how to develop adaptable pedagogy for training learners with Intercultural Communication –knowledge and skills.

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Online Resources

<http://www.awesomelibrary.org/multicultural-training.html>

This Web site provides a collection of multicultural/intercultural communication links, articles, organizations, and other resources.

<http://www.intercultural.org/resources.php>

The resources section of the Intercultural Communications Institute’s Web site offers multiple bibliographies focusing on different areas (education, business, diversity, multicultural teams, conflict resolution, training, and more), a list of upcoming conferences, and descriptions of training tools and assessment instruments commonly used in intercultural training and research, as well as information on where to obtain and how to administer them.

<http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/cultural-services/articles-intercultural.html>

This Web site provides an extensive list of intercultural communication articles and resources.

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/journal/01471767>

International Journal of Intercultural Relations “IJIR is dedicated to advancing knowledge and understanding of theory, practice, and research in intergroup relations. The contents encompass theoretical developments, field-based evaluations of training techniques, empirical discussions of cultural similarities and differences, and critical descriptions of new training approaches.”(Retrieved from

http://www.elsevier.com/wps/find/journaldescription.cws_home/535/description#description)

<http://www.immi.se/intercultural>

Journal of Intercultural Communication “The world today is characterized by an ever-growing number of contacts resulting in communication between people with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This communication takes place because of contacts within the areas of business, military cooperation, science, education, mass media, entertainment, and tourism, but also because of immigration brought about by labor shortage or political conflicts. In all these contacts, there is communication that needs to be as constructive as possible, without misunderstandings and breakdowns. It is our belief that research on the nature of linguistic and cultural similarities and differences here can play a positive and constructive role. The goal of the journal is to promote research but also education and training in the area of intercultural communication.” (Retrieved from <http://www.immi.se/intercultural>)