INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION 1

Use this sheet to help you:

• Understand what is expected of you in the Faculty of Business and Economics
• Get some tips for living life as a successful University student
• Find out where to ask questions

Some Intercultural Blunders

• Coca-Cola wanted Chinese characters for a phonetic equivalent of Coca-Cola, so it chose Ke Kou Ke La, which translates as ‘bite the wax tadpole’ or ‘female horse stuffed with wax’ depending on the dialect.

• In Taiwan, the translation of the Pepsi slogan ‘Come alive with the Pepsi generation’ was translated as ‘Pepsi will bring your ancestors back from the dead.’

• In a Bucharest hotel lobby: ‘The lift is being fixed for the next day. During that time we regret that you will be unbearable.’

• On a menu of a Swiss restaurant: ‘Our wines leave you nothing to hope for.’

• At a Hong Kong dentists: ‘Teeth extracted by the latest Methodists’

• In a Greek tailors: ‘Order your summer suit. Because is big rush we will execute customers in strict rotation.’

• In a Copenhagen airline office: ‘We take you bags and send them in all directions.’

• In an Acapulco hotel: ‘The manager has personally passed all the water served here.’

(Source: Jandt, 2001, Intercultural Communication: An Introduction)
1. Intercultural Communication

Human beings have a great desire to be with people who are similar to themselves. This is because they share the same ways of doing things, the same values and operate by similar rules. When we are with people who are similar to ourselves, the ways we have of doing things just seem like common sense. However, sometimes work or study or a sense of adventure take us out of our comfort zone. When this happens we realize that the things we took for granted about human interaction are not necessarily the same for everyone. This can be a very difficult, even shocking experience. This helpsheet explains what happens when people step out of their comfort zone by experiencing other cultures, either by travelling to another country or by being in contact with people from other cultures who are in your home country. It explains how we react, why we react the way we do and how to make the interaction between people from other cultures a positive experience.

1.1 What is Culture?

Culture can be defined as human creation (Freire, 1970). It is the human part of the environment (Wang, Brislin, Wang, Williams, & Chao, 2000). In other words, culture is the non-biological aspects of life. It is the process of generating and sharing meaning within a social system. This social system is comprised of values, norms and ways of behaving and so culture comprises the ways we interact, behave, and communicate with one another. Culture is something that is learned from parents, schools the media and the broader community. Singer (1998) defined culture as:

a pattern of learned, group-related perceptions – including both verbal and nonverbal language, attitudes, values, belief systems, disbelief systems and behaviours that is accepted and expected by an identity group (Singer, 1998:5)

Yet cultures are not fixed. They are changing and interconnected although change may be slow or irregular. Cultures are dynamic as they are created and recreated through shared interactions (Gudykunst, 1983). However, these changes may be slow or irregular.

The important thing to remember about culture is that while it may be fundamental, it is not innate. Yet it often not discussed, analysed or critiqued but is seen as being ‘common sense’. Culture is made up of the shared values and assumptions of a particular group of people.

Perspectives

Mei Ling is a student in the Faculty of Business and Economics. When she thought about people in her hometown she remembered that she had noticed that in Kuala Lumpur the expatriate community tended to stick together. They lived near each other and socialised with each other. Most of the expats did not spend time with Malaysians or make close friends except with other Australians or Americans.

Adam is a local student in the Faculty of Business and Economics. He thought about the overseas students who had been at his school. They all hung around together, made friends with each other and didn’t seem to make much effort to mix with the Australian students.
Because these values and assumptions are shared, it is easy to take them for granted and believe that they are ‘normal’. In this way it is possible for people to believe that the ways in which they behave and the things they value are right and true for everyone. As Paige, (1993) has pointed out, cultures have an internal logic and coherence and hence their own validity.

However, in order to facilitate communication between cultures it is necessary to understand human reality as socially constructed (Berger & Luckman 1967 cited in Paige 1993). If we can understand that then we can begin to understand that different groups may have different values, different way of communicating, different customs, conventions and assumptions. While these may conflict with our own understandings and assumptions it does not necessarily mean that they are inferior, ‘wrong’ or ‘rude’.

Wang et al., (2000:1–3) identify the essential features of culture. They are:

- Culture is the human made part of the environment.
- Culture reflects widely shared assumptions about life.
- Culture is so fundamental that most people do not and cannot discuss or analyse it.
- Culture becomes evident when someone encounters someone from another country who deviates from their own cultural norms.
- Culture is transmitted from generation to generation
- Even in new situations, people can make a judgement about what is expected in their own culture.
- Cultural values endure and change takes place over a number of generations.
- Violations of cultural norms have an emotional impact
- It is relatively easy (although not necessarily helpful) to make generalisations about cultural differences.

These key features are useful when we consider communication between cultures.

1.2 What is Intercultural Communication?

Today the world we live in is “a global village” where no nation, group or culture can remain anonymous (Samovar & Porter, 1991). What happens in one part of the world affects all parts of the world. As the world is becoming smaller, we are increasingly interacting with people from many different cultures. While modern technology has made it easier for us to communicate with people anywhere in the world, such interactions can be difficult if we do not know how to deal with people and cultures different from our own. Here are examples of some of the obvious mistakes politicians and businesses have made when it comes to dealing with other languages cultures:

- In Germany, a Berliner is a jelly donut. In his speech a the Berlin Wall, President Kennedy, when he said “Heute, ich bin ein Berliner” actually said “Today, I am a jelly donut” when he really meant “Today, I am Berliner (a native of West Berlin)
- In China, KFC’s “finger-licking good” was translated as “eat your fingers off”.
- Chevrolet attempted unsuccessfully to market its Nova compact car in Latin American countries. In Spanish, no va means “does not go” or “it doesn’t run”.
- In Australia, President Bush flashed a backhanded peace sign in motorcades. Many in Australia interpret that gesture as obscene.

(Source: Jandt, 2001, Intercultural Communication: An Introduction)
These language and cultural mistakes can clearly be avoided if we increase our knowledge and understanding of other people and their cultures. The study of intercultural communication addresses this need by examining the communication and interactions between people of different cultures or subcultures. Fundamental to intercultural communication is the belief that it is through culture that people learn to communicate. A Chinese, an Egyptian, or an Australian, for example, learns to communicate like other Chinese, Egyptians, or Australians. Their behavior conveys meaning because it is learned and shared. In other words, it is cultural. Thus, the ways in which people communicate, their language patterns, style, and nonverbal behaviors are all culturally determined (Klopf & Park, 1982).

Samovar & Porter (1997) point out that as cultures differ from one another, the communication practices and behaviours of people will inevitably vary as a result of their different perceptions of the world. Intercultural communication, more precisely then, is defined as the study of communication between people whose "cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough" to alter their communication (Samovar and Porter, 1997: 70). In their model of intercultural communication, Samovar and Porter (1997) illustrate the process of how the meaning of a message changes when it is encoded by a person in one culture and decoded by a person in another culture in the context of his or her own cultural background. In some cases, the message may be interpreted to carry a different meaning than was intended.

**Figure 1**

**Intercultural Communication Model**

(Source: Samovar and Porter, 1997)
In Figure 1A, B and C represents three different cultures. Cultures A and B are similar to one another while culture C is quite different. Within each culture is another form similar to the shape of the influencing parent culture. This represents the person who has been molded by his/her culture. However, the shape of the person is somewhat different from that the parent culture since we are all shaped by our culture, but are also influenced by other factors as well (e.g. age, gender, class, race, etc.). Also, within any culture there is internal variation.

The series of arrows connecting the figures represents the production, transmission, and interpretation of messages across cultures. When a message leaves culture A, for example, it carries the content of the message as it is intended. When it reaches culture B, the message changes because the new culture influences how the message is interpreted and hence its meaning. Also, the greater the differences between the cultures, the more likely the message will be changed.

For example, the change that occurs between cultures A and B is much less than the change between cultures B and C. This is because there is greater similarity between cultures A and B and the message is interpreted more nearly like it was originally intended. Culture C, on the other hand, is quite different from cultures A and B and the message is interrupted differently there and becomes more like the pattern of culture C.

Samovar and Porter’s model shows the possibility of misunderstandings that always exist in intercultural communication, especially if there is great variation in cultural differences. As their model illustrates, the amount of influence a culture has on communication between cultures clearly depends on the similarity of the cultures. The more the cultures are alike, the less influence culture will have on communication. For example, in intercultural communication situations involving Americans and Canadians, culture would not have a strong impact as the two cultures have much in common (e.g. language, geography, religion, political system, etc.). On the other hand, we can expect culture to have great impact when a German communicates with a Chinese as the two cultures differ greatly (e.g. physical appearance, language, religion, concept of self, etc.)

When communicating with someone from a different culture, we can therefore expect cultural differences to have an influence. Cultural differences stem from our differing perceptions, which in turn determines how we communicate with people of other cultures. By understanding how people perceive the world, their values and beliefs, we can better understand what they say and can anticipate potential cross-cultural misunderstandings. Let’s now look more closely at what we mean by perceptions, beliefs and values in the intercultural context.

1.2.1 Perception
Perception is defined as “the internal process by which we select, organize and interpret information” from the outside world (Klopf & Park, 1982:26). In other words, our perceptions of the world are what we tend to notice, reflect upon and respond to in our environment that are meaningful and significant to us. As a result, no two of us perceive our surroundings in exactly the same way. This is especially the case if we interact with people who come from cultures very different from our own. The way in which each one of us perceives the world is learned and is part of our cultural experience. Whether it be the judgment we make of a certain kind of food or the responses we have to going to see the doctor, we all react to these different events in the way that our culture has taught. Our perceptions are culturally determined and in turn influence the way we communicate with others.
1.2.2 Beliefs
Beliefs are the judgments we make about what is true or probable. They are usually linked to objects or events that possess certain characteristics that we believe to be true with or without proof (Samovar & Porter, 1997). For example, we have beliefs about religion (there is a God), events (the meeting was successful), other people (she is friendly) or even about ourselves (I am hard-working). According to Price (2000), most of our beliefs are ideas about how things work, why things are the way they are, and where things come from. Many of our beliefs are also concerned with providing an explanation for things which would otherwise be unpredictable or inexplicable, such as the weather, death and romance. Like our perception, our beliefs are determined by our cultural backgrounds and experiences. We are taught very early on what to believe based on what our culture considers worthy and true. Subsequently, our belief systems form the basis of our values, which determine in large measure how we behave and relate to others.

1.2.3 Values
Values are defined as “an enduring set of beliefs that serve to guide or direct our behaviour” (Klopf & Park, 1982). They represent the norms of a culture and specify, for instance, what is good or bad, right or wrong, rude or polite, appropriate or inappropriate. In other words, they provide us with a set of rules for behaving, making choices and reducing uncertainty. Like our perceptions and beliefs, values are learned and hence subject to interpretation. When we interpret behaviour, an object, or an event, we are applying value judgments, which reflect our particular culture.

For instance, an English person who values personal space very highly may consider it rude when a Mexican stands too close. A Japanese who values conformity may find it inappropriate when an American express too much of his or her own opinions. The relative importance of values within each culture can also be revealed through sayings, such as “Time is money” (American), “A zebra does not despise its stripes” (African) or “No need to know the person, only the family” (Chinese). Such sayings impart values that are important in each culture and can provide us with a better understanding of others’ cultural beliefs.

One of the criticisms of discussions of intercultural communication is that it can be said to generalise about cultures. However, our aim is not to oversimplify, or to claim that ‘Asian students are like this’ and ‘Australian students and like that’. The idea that there is such a thing as an ‘Asian student’ is clearly an over generalisation as Asia is a vast area, comprising many nations. Even the idea of a ‘Chinese’ student is a difficult one. Do we mean only mainland China? Clearly not. Do we mean Chinese speaking? Not necessarily. The notion of an ‘Australian’ is also a difficult one as this is a new country comprised of the original inhabitants, the Aborigines, the white colonists and more recent migrants from a wide range of backgrounds.

When thinking about communication between cultures, rather than thinking of them as entirely separate and static it is more useful to consider them as dynamic and interconnected. However, it is also important to consider that for particular characteristics (for example individualist/collectivist), while individuals in each culture
will be found across the spectrum, in any one culture people will be clustered around a certain point. Although people are clustered around a certain point, there is also an area of overlap where they may share some similarities (see figure 2).

Figure 2

![Diagram showing overlap between Asians and Australians](image)

(See also CELT Helpsheets: Intercultural Communication 2 and Intercultural Communication 3)

References


