

THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS: CAN ACTIVE LEARNING BRIDGE THE CULTURAL DIVIDE?

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Introduction

Edward Hall's (1959, 1976, 1990, 2000) original conceptualization of intercultural communication emerged primarily from his framework of cultural context. In this framework, national cultures were placed on a continuum ranging from high context to low context cultures. While it is important to avoid stereotypes of people based upon their respective native cultures, Hall's framework continues to provide a useful albeit simplistic tool for evaluating cultures on values such as personal orientation, communication styles, time orientation, and decision-making styles to name just a few. When coupled with other models of understanding cultural values, such as Hofstede's Dimension of Cultural Values (1997, 2001), international marketers can better prepare themselves for the countless obstacles they may face in the realm of conducting business in another country—a country where they may be less familiar or even clueless about how to communicate appropriately and effectively.

In this paper, we examine intercultural communication styles in a business context and explore ways to improve the intercultural communication skills of budding international marketers in the context of an undergraduate intercultural business communications course. Through active learning exercises applied in this course, we discuss the opportunities and challenges of utilizing such approaches within the classroom setting.

Intercultural Communication Styles in a Business Context

According to Hall's framework of cultural context, communication styles vary by cultural context (1959, 1976, 1990, 2000). Cultural context, a complex idea, is the wide-ranging notion that underscores how much or how little importance is placed upon the "context" of a situation. According to Hall's framework (1959, 1976, 1990, 2000), the meaning of a communication or message in low context cultures is derived primarily from the words that are spoken—not the context. As a result, the communication style is more direct and explicit. The lowest context culture is Switzerland, and other low context cultures include but are not limited to Great Britain, Germany, France, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and mainstream United States of America (USA). At the opposite end of the continuum, the highest context culture is Japan and other high context cultures include but are not limited to Italy, Spain, and most Latin American, Arab, and African countries. In high context cultures, the meaning of the communication is derived primarily from the context—the history, the immediate surroundings, the social status of the individuals who are interacting, prior knowledge, etc.—not from the words that are being used to communicate. As a result, the communication style is more indirect and implicit. In addition, it is important to emphasize that most of the communication in high context cultures is non-verbal in nature (Jain and Choudhary 2011, Sundaram and Webster 2000, Wang 2012). This aspect of intercultural communications, in both a business and a non-business context, is one of the most perplexing aspects of communicating across the cultural divide of high versus low context cultures. Commonly referred to as the "silent language" of international business, nonverbal communication can include a wide range of values and behaviors including oculosics (eye contact), proxemics (personal space), haptics (touch), chronemics (time orientation), kinesics (body language including facial expressions and gestures), and paralanguage (timing, volume, tone and inflection of the voice) (Burgoon et al. 2009, Hall 1959, Horne et al. 2008, Mehrabian 2007, Prabhu 2010, Preston 2005, Sundaram and Webster 2000, Yates 2015, Zachry 2003). Due to the complex and varied nature of nonverbal communication, to say nothing of the more obvious spoken language challenge, it is truly a wonder that any business negotiation or communication gets done effectively at all.

Active Learning for Intercultural Business Communications

The active and/or experiential learning model, derived primarily from Kolb's (1981, 1984) Experiential Learning Model, offers tremendous opportunities for high impact learning that will foster a deeper

learning process. Used as a pedagogical approach in marketing and other disciplines, active learning offers clear advantages over traditional, lecture-based approaches to learning (Cardon 2010, Drea et al. 2005; Fowler and Bridges 2012; Frontczak 1998; Kolb 1981, 1984; Petkus Jr. 2000). Among other things; it increases student involvement, helps students integrate theory with practice, improves students' communication skills, improves students' critical thinking skills, and activates "deeper" and more transformative learning (Frontczak 1998; Kolb 1981, 1984; Petkus Jr. 2000).

In our undergraduate intercultural business communications course, the course objectives include the analysis of communication issues in an intercultural or global business context, the introduction of intercultural communication theories, intercultural business negotiations, and the role of nonverbal communication in conducting business effectively. Since we reside in the United States and our course is part of a series of courses offered in an international business curriculum at a U.S. business school, our pedagogical approach begins from the perspective of a low context, U.S. business school. The challenge this position presents is that, based upon cultural context, international marketing students must learn to work and communicate in high context cultures such as China, India, Brazil, Vietnam, Turkey, and Thailand. While learning the spoken language is beyond the scope of this course, learning the "silent language" is very relevant to the objectives of this course. In the following paragraphs, we discuss how we integrate active learning through in-class exercises designed to analyze intercultural communication styles (Table 1), reflect upon cultural values (Table 2), and practice nonverbal communication (Table 3).

Table 1
Active Learning Exercise: Intercultural Communication Styles

Activity	Detailed Steps
Analyze Cultural Differences in Communication Style	<p>Students are as to identify and analyze the key differences in communication styles when comparing the United States to a different country of their choice. (They are all provided first with the basic definitions of each communication style variable.)</p> <p>Using a 10-point scale, students rank the two countries on the four communication style variables:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) direct versus indirect, (2) informal versus formal, (3) specific versus wide [context-based] (4) principles first versus applications first
Closing Discussion	<p>Instructor facilitates discussion about each communication variable and how it affects a company's marketing activities in that country as well as how the customers in that country will behave towards a product or service. Students are encouraged to add examples to support or refute the ratings of the country communication styles.</p>
Student Reflection and Synthesis	<p>After the exercises, working in "country" assigned teams, students assess how the communication style of a country would impact a US business's ability to enter and compete for customers in that country.</p>

Table 2
Active Learning Exercise: Cultural Values

Activity	Detailed Steps
Student Reflection on Cultural Values	Students are provided with a worksheet and asked to identify their own cultural values and the values frameworks discussed previously in class (e.g., Hofstede’s Model of Cultural Values). (Hofstede 1997, 2001) The worksheet includes a list of 36 “Traditional American Values” that are socially approved in American culture (e.g., honesty, cleanliness, tolerance, obey the law, loyalty to your country, influence other countries to become more democratic, independence, etc.)
Students Rank Their Cultural Values	Once students have checked off their own cultural values on the worksheet, they are asked to select their five most important variables and rank them in descending order. They are also asked to explain why they rated each variable so highly.
Student Reflection and Synthesis	After students have identified and ranked their five most important cultural values, they are asked to respond to the following questions during an instructor-led, large group discussion: (1) Who or what has influenced you in developing your cultural values? (2) How can you use this course to further clarify your awareness of both your own cultural value orientation and those of others? (3) Which of the categories in Hofstede’s Model of Cultural Values intersect with your top five values?

Table 3
Active Learning Exercise: Nonverbal Communication

Activity	Detailed Steps
Short Lecture	Instructor conducts a short (15-minute) lecture to review nonverbal communication variables such as oculosics (eye contact), proxemics (personal space), haptics (touch), chronemics (time orientation), kinesics (body language including facial expressions and gestures), and paralanguage (timing, volume, tone and inflection of the voice). This short lecture usually includes a short improvisation skit of nonverbal communication performed by the instructor. This initial skit is designed to prime the students for the next step—student improvisations (Aylesworth 2008, Rocco and Whalen 2014).
Student Improvisational Skits	Students are divided into small groups of 4-5 students each. Each group is handed a notecard that includes one of the following six nonverbal communication scenarios and, after five minutes to prepare, each student group performs their skit live in front of the entire class. Students are typically highly engaged in this activity, so expect a lot of noise and laughter. (1) Using kinesics , conduct a job interview which involves a job candidate who is not interested in the position at all. (2) Using kinesics , conduct a job interview which involves a job candidate who is extremely interested in the position.

	<p>(3) Using oculesics, conduct a conversation between a lower level employee and his/her supervisor in a high context culture such as Japan (Japanese language not required!)</p> <p>(4) Using oculesics, conduct a conversation between a lower level employee and his/her supervisor in a low context culture such as U.S. business culture</p> <p>(5) Using proxemics, demonstrate several people riding on a public train in a high context culture such as Japan</p> <p>(6) Using proxemics, demonstrate several people riding on a public train (like Metrorail) in a low context culture such as the United States.</p>
Student Reflection on Nonverbal Communication	Once the improvisational skits have been completed, each student is asked to reflect upon what they learned and how each scenario was different depending upon the context. Their reflections are written in the form of a five-minute paper that is collected for documentation purposes.
Closing Discussion	Instructor facilitates a large group discussion about nonverbal communication and how it impacts intercultural communication in a business context.

Discussion and Conclusions

Intercultural communications in a business context can be complicated and frustrating for international marketers, regardless of their cultural background or the country in which they are conducting business. Even if they have acquired the fundamentals of the language spoken in the host country, the cultural values in that context will be different and, for the most part, can only be acquired through extended experience in that country market. Nonetheless, for budding international marketers, it is important to take the first steps toward cultural understanding through courses that introduce existing models and frameworks about cultural values, cultural communication styles, nonverbal communication, and other important aspects of marketing in a different cultural context (Hall 1959, 1976, 1990, 2000; Hofstede 1997, 2001; Burgoon et al. 2009; Horne et al. 2008; Mehrabian 2007; Prabhu 2010, Preston 2005; Sundaram and Webster 2000; Yates 2015; Zachry 2003).

In our intercultural business communications course, students are exposed to a wealth of information about these important topics. When challenged to explore and confront their personal biases and values, many students must move beyond their cultural comfort zones. This discomfort presents a sometimes uncomfortable but typically ideal opportunity for critical learning. Through a combination of short lectures, in-depth reading assignments, and in-class active learning exercises; students learn how cultures are different and how they are alike. In a traditional lecture- and exam-based class, the pedagogy for understanding cultural differences and similarities may not resonate as clearly as is needed. These are complex cultural constructs that genuinely benefit from the deeper thinking, reflection, and critical thinking gained through the pedagogical approach of active learning (Frontczak 1998; Kolb 1981, 1984; Petkus Jr. 2000). And so, when attempting to bridge the sometimes deep cultural divide of communicating across cultures, active learning offers a genuine opportunity to immerse students into the cultural unknown in a way that will foster critical thinking and take them on a journey far beyond the mundane walls of the college classroom.

References Available Upon Request