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## Introduction to Cultural Diversity in the Basic Course: Differing Points of View

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## **Introduction to Cultural Diversity in the Basic Course: Differing Points of View**

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*Lawrence W. Hugenberg*

There are many areas discussed in the following papers on cultural diversity in the basic communication course. Cultural diversity is important in a changing world. If our basic courses are to be current with student needs of the future, incorporating instruction on effectiveness within multicultural settings is important. There seems to be agreement that diversity in the basic course suggests opening students' minds to appreciate and understand differences between and among people. This approach includes the obvious cultural differences such as international, interracial, and gender communication; as well as multicultural communication between and among people of the same general "American" culture (Thomas, 1994). This orientation holds that within the general "American" culture there are multiple smaller, more specific, cultures (African American, Native American, Hispanic American, Asian American, Caucasian, etc.). Researchers suggest that American society will become increasingly more diverse into the twenty-first century (Hollins 1990; Naisbitt & Aburdene 1990). These authors tell us that communication educators need to vary approaches to meet the multiple needs of more diverse audiences (Thomas, 1990) (See: *Sellnow & Littlefield; Oludaja & Honken*). However, reality suggests that Americans are insensitive to other ways of thinking. Even more pressing to the basic

course is that textbook reviewers do not like different ways of thinking and instructors don't like change.

Two broad topics emerge from a careful reading of the following papers:

- (1) integrating diversity in the basic course, and
- (2) teaching diversity in the classroom.

The discussion in this introduction revolves around both topics.

## **INTEGRATING DIVERSITY IN THE BASIC COURSE**

Several textbooks designed for use in the basic communication course have attempted to incorporate more information on diversity (See: *Goulden*). A popular assignment asks students to develop speeches on a culture different than their own (See: *Kelly; Goulden; and Powell*). Expanding student experience beyond European (Western) models of communication is essential if we incorporate cultural diversity as an educational objective in the basic communication course (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994). As a result of this assignment, students think about the characteristics of a culturally different audience and how those differences impact communication. Instructors, then, must evaluate the students' assignments incorporating the cultural characteristics provided by the students. A "good" basic communication course textbook would prepare both student and instructor to examine communication from culturally sensitive perspectives.

Currently, our evaluation forms are often too specific and too "Westernized" to incorporate cultural communication practices. For example, one popular approach to speech eval-

uation incorporates "appropriateness" in each of the following categories:

- (1) choosing and narrowing a topic,
- (2) communicating the thesis/specific purpose,
- (3) providing supporting materials,
- (4) using an appropriate organizational pattern,
- (5) using appropriate language,
- (6) using pitch, rate, and vocal intensity to heighten and maintain interest,
- (7) using appropriate pronunciation, grammar and articulation, and
- (8) using physical behaviors that support the verbal message (Morreale, et al. 1992; Morreale 1994).

The use of any standardized evaluation form raises the question about which areas are appropriate to analyze and which cultural foundations will be used in assessing student speeches. These are important issues in the assessment of students' performances in the basic communication course.

We need to make our critique sheets less culture specific and more accommodating of individual and cultural differences (See: *Kelly*). Communication educators need assignment evaluation systems that incorporate differing models and orientations to the communication process — not one culture-specific point of view. For example, in our textbooks and classrooms, we expect informative speeches to have specific steps to include gaining attention, stating the thesis, and giving the listeners a preview; yet in some other cultures, this kind of introduction to an informative speech is unacceptable and too rigid (Victor, 1992). Communication educators need to research, test, and adopt evaluation measures that enable students to be comfortable with communication skills consistent with their own cultural makeup. Our approaches to

teaching communication are not supported by research on how other cultures respond in varying communication situations. Reliance on the tradition of classical audience analysis forces students to change their behaviors and communication patterns to "fit" a predetermined model. As a result, communication educators teach students to rely on laundry lists of cultural stereotypes attempting to characterize people from various cultures. These laundry lists seem to perpetuate the myths consistent with many of our American stereotypes of "appropriate" cultural dynamics.

One goal of cultural diversity assignments is for students doing the assignment and the students observing the assignment to become better informed about different cultures and communication practices as related to communication effectiveness. However, there is a danger that highlighting cultural differences might increase a student's tendency to stereotype others using a few characteristics and further insulate their views of culture (Victor, 1992). As communication instructors teach adaptation to listeners from different cultures, it is appropriate to develop cultural linkages that emphasize the similarities between cultures. It is easier to teach students to be more culturally sensitive if we teach them how to look for, identify, and emphasize these linkages.

A dichotomy in the study of cultural diversity centers on expected outcomes versus understanding the construction of diversity. The resulting dilemma for instructors is to accommodate everyone's cultural differences. Accommodating different points of view, different ways of thinking, and different ways of communicating goes counter to the way we traditionally teach the basic course. For the most part, we expect students to become "Westernized" in their thinking and in their communication performances (Hugenberg & Yoder, 1993) (See: *Kelly*). There are specific, and sometimes singular, sets of performance standards in the classroom that instructors want students to learn and adopt. Instructors have specific goals and objectives (outcomes) that include

specific communication models, processes, and approaches they want students to learn and apply in their assignments. These goals and objectives often conflict with opportunities to teach and discuss cultural diversity in the basic communication course.

An associated issue is the culture of the instructor. Instructors must also be aware of their cultural identity so it does not hinder or limit their instruction or affect their perceptions of their students from differing cultures using differing cultural communication practices. Moving away from the ethnocentric, "Western" point of view may force many communication educators to rethink the way they teach and evaluate student assignments in the basic communication course.

## **TEACHING DIVERSITY IN THE CLASSROOM**

Another topic calls for specific lectures and class discussions emphasizing the influences of culture on communication and communication on culture. The authors even agree that communication education has settled into believing and mirroring a "dominant" culture and has focused instructional efforts to try and incorporate other "non-dominant" cultures into a dominant point of view (**Specifically see: *Oludaja & Honken***). Within the pre-existing frame of reference of the "dominant" culture, this approach to emphasizing the existence of subcultures assumes they are in a "lower" position than the dominant culture. This problem is emphasized time-and-time-again by the value our instruction and textbooks place on the Eurocentric tradition. Sections of textbooks, with rare exception, address cultural diversity in merely superficial ways (pictures, names, examples, etc.). This is a poor substitute for addressing diversity as an integral part of the communication process.

Americans have a difficult time valuing other cultural traditions because we fail to value other ways of thinking and other forms of logic. A technique to reduce the emphasis on our mono-cultural point of view is to talk about co-cultures — placing different cultures on the same level; as co-equals. To teach different cultural "models," we have to teach students how to understand and appreciate differing points of view. Our role, in a culturally sensitive classroom, is to enhance students' understandings of different cultures and to apply these understandings in different communication situations.

It continues to be difficult to talk about culture and diversity in the basic course because we cannot agree on the characteristics of culture. For too long, educators have assumed culture meant ethnicity or race (Thomas, 1990; Aburdene & Naisbitt, 1992; Wood, 1994; and Gray, 1992). This is far too restrictive a view for it fails to reflect an accurate perspective of the complexities of culture and multiculturalism (See: *Sellnow & Littlefield; Kelly*).

Of course, studying ethnicity is not easy and reaching useful understandings of individuals' views of their own ethnic backgrounds can be very difficult. "What does it mean to be an African American?" or "What does it mean to be a Native American?" or "What does it mean to be European American?" or "What does it mean to be a Hispanic American?" are difficult questions — even for people from these cultures. Even the "American" culture is defined and operationalized differently in different parts of our country. This fact supports the contention that limiting the study of culture to solely ethnic or racial background limits the insights we may teach students in the basic course.

Each author agrees the key to adapting communication to people of different cultures is to first understand ourselves — then understand the situation — then understand others. Teachers have to teach students to be true to themselves in their communication with others. The authors contend communication educators take the concepts of audience

analysis and audience adaptation too far — forcing students to compromise themselves to adapt to listeners (See: *Sellnow & Littlefield*). There is a common practice in basic communication course classrooms that asks students to cross the delicate balance between their Selves and their audiences — and forces adapting the self to the audience. Students *cannot* become someone else during their assignments and instructors should not expect them to compromise who they are. Students should learn to be rhetorically sensitive, understand differences among people, and to use these differences in preparing their messages. Communication instruction can focus on helping students change their communication in response to these differences. However, more important than either of these notions, we must teach students to be comfortable with themselves and their communication skills when talking with others and reinforce this notion frequently in the classroom.

Another problem communication educators experience in trying to integrate diversity into their classes is the responsibility of textbook authors and publishers to explain and incorporate cultural diversity (See: *Oludaja & Honken; Goulden; Sellnow & Littlefield*). Communication textbooks are, for the most part, descriptive of the dominant culture and prescribe ways to make the student-reader more like the dominant culture. Authors and publishers attempt to meet the expectations of others, specifically reviewers. Reviewers have been taught to think in a "Western" manner; so changing the way they think is threatening. People resist change in the ways they teach the basic communication course (See: *Goulden*). Textbooks continue to offer linear reasoning because reviewers do not like different ways of thinking than their own (See: *Powell*). Little has changed in the way we have taught persuasive or informative speaking in many decades. Basic communication courses are predicated on communication skill development. Communication textbooks continue to validate the way the dominant culture thinks which, subsequently,



affects the way communication skills are taught. Authors and publishers need to add more about diversity to our communication textbooks than sample speeches, photographs, and obvious cultural names in examples. Token approaches to expressing cultural diversity in communication textbooks miss the issue of cultural diversity *in the classroom*.

We also need to teach students to listen to people from different cultures. A second message sent by the way we teach audience analysis and adaptation is that listeners should expect speakers to adapt to their point of view and their way of thinking. The message is: *Speakers need to adapt, listeners don't*. This is the wrong message to send to students in the basic communication course who will spend a large portion of their personal and professional lives listening to people — people with cultural backgrounds different than the student's own.

What follows are the papers shared by the participants in the Central States Communication Association Pre-Conference Seminar, "Cultural Diversity in the Basic Course." We all hope they provide an appreciation of cultural diversity and its appropriate place in basic communication courses.

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