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Instructional Communication Strategies for Adapting to a Multicultural Introductory Course

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No educator is surprised to hear that college enrollment for members of racial and ethnic groups is continuing to rise (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1990). However, this increase was particularly striking for us after we began teaching in the southwestern United States. We had moved from Minnesota, where the proportion of college students who are minority-group members is only 4%, to New Mexico where the proportion of college students who are minority-group members is 35%, the highest for any state in the continental United States¹ (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1990). We now look out into multicultural classrooms that will increase in cultural diversity year after year. As a result of this increase in cultural diversity, one question facing those responsible for teaching communication courses is: What changes, if any, are needed in the instructional strategies for teaching in a multicultural introductory communication course?

Many of us often forget that our teaching is also grounded in a theoretical perspective. Exploring and making our theoretical perspective explicit functions to help us deal with problems and changes occurring in the classrooms and allows us to respond to changes in a systematic manner. For us, the best way to answer the question about how to adapt to multicultural classrooms is to take a theoretical perspective that is grounded in the ethnographic literature. An ethnographic

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approach to communication education focuses on the use of situationally grounded studies and the comparative analysis of cultures. The concepts, methods, and resources that take an ethnographic perspective on communication will prove fruitful for improving our courses and help us deal with the multicultural classrooms we now face or will face in the near future.

To begin to answer the question about teaching in the multicultural introductory communication course, we examined current literature, analyzed situations occurring in our own classrooms, and surveyed students about their perceptions of the courses in which they were enrolled. Based on our investigations, we will describe several instructional communication strategies we argue may be used to adapt communication courses to an increasingly diverse student population. We will present strategies in four general areas of teaching in the introductory communication course: a) Expanding the parameters of culture, b) Language, c) Assignments, and d) Resources. Finally, we will discuss issues of evaluation of teaching effectiveness in the multicultural classroom.

ADAPTATIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

Expanding the Definition of Culture

Traditionally, when thinking of the multicultural classroom and looking to the available literature, our attention is focused on students of different ethnic backgrounds and/or international students. Collier and Powell (1990) argue for the importance of differentiating between issues of ethnicity in the classroom and issues of culture. Ethnicity, then, does not constitute the culture of a classroom, but rather becomes part of the emergent classroom culture (Collier & Powell, 1990).

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The time has come when we must broaden our understanding of culture in the classroom realizing that, along with ethnic minorities and international students, there are many other minority groups represented. Therefore, we define culture as a historically transmitted system of shared symbols and meaning (Schneider, 1976). This definition allows us to expand our notion of who is a “minority” student, e.g., persons with disabilities as a culture (D.O. Braithwaite 1990; 1991; Emry & Wiseman, 1987; Padden & Humphres, 1988), Vietnam veterans as a culture (C.A. Braithwaite, 1990a), older persons as a culture (Carmichael, 1988), “blue-collar” urban males as a culture (Philipsen, 1975; 1976; 1986), and gay culture (Majors, 1988) to name a few.

Expanding the definition of culture encourages instructors to recognize the unique needs of members of these groups and to recognize contributions that members of these cultural groups can make. For example, we have provided opportunities for physically disabled students to talk about their disability in the interpersonal communication class, opening up discussions of uncertainty and discomfort among majority students. At the same time, these discussions may serve as a way for the disabled student to let able-bodied others know what it is like to be a member of the disabled culture. Further, we are able to discuss communication theory and its applicability to different cultural groups. In the interpersonal communication course, we have discussed research arguing that a norm of reciprocity of self-disclosure is problematic for able-bodied persons when communicating with disabled others, as there is no acceptable way for able-bodied persons to reciprocate when a disabled person has disclosed how they broke their neck (D. O. Braithwaite, 1988a). This situation gives us the opportunity to test and discuss the applicability of communication theory in light of a cultural group to whom it may not apply.

Focusing attention in the classroom on students of different cultures serves to make the concept of culture

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“problematic,” giving rise to heightened student awareness of cultural differences and similarities with their colleagues. For example, when we collected data from our students, we found that students used several different address terms for ethnicity indicating Spanish origin. While a majority of our students used the term “Hispanic,” others used “Mexican-American,” “Spanish-American,” “Portuguese,” and “mixed” (to indicate they had one Anglo and one Hispanic parent). We know that these address terms will differ in other geographic regions as well. In Los Angeles, many persons will use the term “Latino,” yet that term was not used by any of the students we questioned. Confronting such issues as address terms in the classroom allows instructors and students to find alternative terms with cultural differences that are salient to students from different cultural groups.

Language

There are two language issues we attempt to address in adapting to a multicultural classroom. First is the problem of assuming homogeneity. We have not seen a textbook intended for use in the introductory communication courses that did not use a generic “us” or “we” when describing or prescribing communication behaviors. All too often the texts imply a homogeneity among the students, and ignore cultural diversity. For example, one of the texts (DeVito, 1988), a hybrid interpersonal communication and public speaking course, is full of statements like, “*we* are an egocentric society” (111), “all *our* interactions need to be characterized by the principle of balance” (111), and “*we* can often tell when two people genuinely like each other” (157), etc.² This does not reflect on any intentional ethnocentrism on the part of the textbook author, it merely reflects the purpose of our mass-produced textbooks to address the largest portion of their audience.

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Because of the above, we work hard to avoid assuming homogeneity of our students. We do this by avoiding in our lectures, discussions, and handouts any use of the generic “us” or “we” when it comes to referring to communication behavior. In much the same way women have objected to the use of the generic “he” (Martyna, 1978), members of minority groups have objected to the implication that research on communication of Anglo college students applies to them as well. Accordingly, we consistently reveal the population of any study we refer to in the course to let the students know whether the findings do or do not apply to their cultural group. For example, when discussing turn-taking cues in conversation, we refer students to studies by Schegloff (1972) which report what is known about some Anglo patterns of conversation, as well as studies by Philips (1983) which contrast Anglo patterns with those of some Native Americans. Although we cannot describe all the studies that report distinctive patterns of communication, repeated reference to some studies of other cultural groups communicates to the students our sensitivity to the cultural differences present in the classroom. Our goal is to have the students understand that the field of communication studies includes an interest in, and appreciation of, cultural diversity.

The second language issue we are concerned with are the problems with overgeneralization of cultures. Jensen (1985) warned that the superficial study of cultures, particularly when it comes to studying nonverbal communication, leads to a tendency to overgeneralize findings and ignore the important variations that exist within a culture. For example, Hall’s (1966) seminal study of proxemics across cultures lumps a variety of cultures under the heading of “Arabs,” and thereby glosses over the significant differences between nomadic tribes of Saudi Arabia and the shopkeepers in Baghdad, between the fundamentalist holy man in Jordan and the Mercedes salesman in Kuwait, etc. “Native American” is a term many use to label significantly diverse cultural groups.

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For example, the name “Athabaskan” is used by multiple tribal groups, each seeing themselves as distinct from the others (Rushforth, 1981; Scollon & Wong-Scollon, 1990). Before coming to New Mexico we were not sensitive to the fact that the label “Apache” does not take into account the variety of Apache tribes throughout the southwest, e.g., Chirahuaca Apache, Cibecue Apache, Jicarillo Apache, Mescalero Apache, and Pima Apache. Studies of communication patterns of one group of Apache cannot easily be generalized to other Apache. We find that by demonstrating reluctance to overgeneralize to cultures, our students are less likely to make the same mistake, and we communicate our interest in understanding the diversity within, as well as across, cultural groups.

Assignments

The purpose of the strategies described above is to communicate to the multicultural class that sensitivity to cultural differences is an important part of teaching communication. Because many introductory communication courses also provide students with an opportunity to write and/or conduct communication research, the instructor who wants to adapt to the multicultural classroom can heighten students’ sensitivity to cultural issues by giving assignments that allow and encourage the analysis of cultural similarities and differences in communication. That is, the instructor can develop assignments, or be open to student proposed assignments, that would allow the students to examine communication issues that are unique to a particular culture. For example, after presenting cross-cultural research on the use and interpretation of silence (C.A. Braithwaite, 1990b), a student who is a Mescalero Apache was asked to present the findings concerning silence among the Cibecue Apache to her Mescalero relatives to compare similarities and differences.

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This assignment serves three purposes. First, the comparative approach encourages the student to develop a heightened awareness of her or his own cultural patterns of communication. Second, the student's understanding of her or his within-culture relationships becomes more refined and specific. Finally, when the student discusses the results of this assignment with the class, everyone's knowledge of cross-cultural similarities and differences is broadened.

A second strategy is to ask students to "test" some of the prescriptions for communication found in our textbooks by comparing the prescriptions with the preferred communication behavior of their own culture. Courses that include instruction in public speaking usually present an Aristotelian model that is considered to be effective in most Western cultural contexts (Campbell, 1981). The "conventional form" for public speaking (Burke, 1968) is often presented as a useful tool for preparing almost all public presentations. However, we also inform students that other models for public speaking exist which could be more appropriate in certain cultural contexts. For example, Jensen (1985) discusses how the restrictions placed on speaking time in our public speeches is literally foreign to many other cultures. Philipsen (1972) presents an instructive contrast of Aristotelian rhetorical theory with that of the Navajo. Without down-playing the utility of our conventional form, exposure to other conceptualizations of public discourse can lead to a greater understanding of the importance of situational and cultural appropriateness in public speaking. Students can be asked to find similar studies that present culturally specific data on communication and compare and contrast the results with the material from their texts and lectures.³

Finally, another approach is to instruct students to describe the cultural patterns of communication in their own cultural group and compare and contrast these with the descriptions of communication presented in class. One assignment we have used in the introductory interpersonal

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communication course asks students to evaluate the communication advice put forth in popular magazines by evaluating the advice in light of communication theories studied in class and testing that advice on people outside the classroom. Students typically design questions administered in survey or interview form. Several of our students have chosen to test the communication advice on members of minority groups. One student chose to test the advice on marital conflict styles on Black and Hispanic couples. This gave the student the opportunity to review literature on these couples' communication and to test the applicability of communication theory for these minority couples. The goal of these assignments is to communicate that, although the information and prescriptions presented in our courses are useful, they are not able to account for communication in all cultural contexts.

Resources

The above suggestions may sound as though we are advocating turning all communication courses into intercultural communication courses. Although at some point in the not-too-distant future this may become necessary, for now we are suggesting that the instructor in the introductory communication course has the burden to become as sensitive as possible to the diversity of communication practices found in the world today. We believe the best way to accomplish this is to familiarize oneself with the ethnographic literature available on various cultural patterns of communication. Instead of studying culture by focusing on "universals" (i.e., Gudykunst & Kim, 1984), we can be more informative and helpful to students by teaching them to look for, understand, and appreciate the tremendous amount of variance in cultural communication practices. As stated by Hymes (1972), human communication

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“cannot be understood apart from the evolution and maintenance of its ethnographic diversity” (41).

There are many resources that would be useful for starting to find information about culturally distinctive patterns of communication that could be used in the multicultural classroom. Five resources that are particularly helpful include:

1. Gerry Philipsen & Donal Carbaugh’s (Eds.). (1986). “A Bibliography of Fieldwork in the Ethnography of Communication.” This provides citations of 282 studies that describe and analyze diverse speech communities.
2. John Gumperz & D. Hymes’ (Eds.). (1972). *Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication*. This reader provides 19 ethnographic studies of communication rules in verbal and nonverbal behavior.
3. Richard Bauman & Joel Sherzer’s (Eds.). (1974). *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking*. This is a reader similar to Gumperz & Hymes presenting 21 ethnographic studies.
4. Donal Carbaugh’s (Ed.). (1990). *Cultural Communication and Intercultural Contact*. The most recent collection of ethnographies available covering many different dimensions of communicative behavior.
5. Two journals that are excellent sources for current cultural studies of communication are *Language in Society*, and *Research on Language and Social Interaction*. The former began publishing in 1972 and the latter in 1987.

It is difficult to imagine that there is a topic covered in any communication course for which you could not find data from other cultures by looking at these and other ethnographic sources, e.g., self-disclosure, conflict, male/female relationships, socialization, nonverbal communication, etc.

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EVALUATING EFFECTIVENESS IN THE CLASSROOM

When trying new approaches in the classroom, instructors will want to evaluate whether such ventures are successful. We sought to do this by asking students to write about whether the courses applied to them culturally, stressing that they take into account such cultural factors as ethnicity, gender, and age. Students from four communication courses responded to open-ended questions detailing how well they believed the course topics, lectures, discussions, texts, assignments, and classroom exercises applied to them and their lives. Of the 83 respondents, 57% indicated they were Anglo American and 39% indicated they were minority students (slightly higher than our state average). A small number of students did not indicate their ethnicity. Of the minority students, 72% were Hispanic, 5% Native American, 1% Black American; and the remainder fell into other categories or simply indicated they were minority. Fifty-six percent of the students were juniors and seniors; 43% were males and 57% were females.

Since 39% of our students were from ethnic minority groups, we fully expected these students to be critical of the applicability of communication research and theory to their cultures. We found just the opposite to be true. Students in our courses readily reported that they perceived the course content to be relevant to their lives. One male Mexican-American's⁴ response was typical of those received, "I feel all topics applied to my life because they are very common things that happen to all people including myself." One Hispanic female from a nonverbal communication course responded, "Understanding nonverbal communication culturally, gender differences, etc. This has helped me recognize cultural differ-

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ences and understand why people are the way they are. I am not as judgmental.”

A few minority students indicated that studying other cultures did not apply to their lives. Yet interestingly, they often ended their statements saying that these studies were ultimately positive for them. For example, when responding to a question regarding topics covered in class that did not apply directly to their lives, one Hispanic female said, “Studying cultures — Danes, Japanese, German, and English because I have not encountered them yet, but for future reference, I think it will be very important.” Another Hispanic female responded, “Danish life — I don’t know any Danish people and will probably never go there. But this really didn’t bother me. It is OK to learn about other cultures. I can’t really think of anything that couldn’t be applied.” We are encouraged that these students were able to understand the usefulness of studies about persons from cultures other than their own.

How do we interpret these results? On one hand, we believe that these students are satisfied with the job we are doing to adapt our teaching to different cultural groups. This validates the perspective advanced in this paper. It is possible that many of our students may be so assimilated into Anglo classroom culture that they may not readily recognize, or be able to retrospectively recall, instances when communication theory and research did not apply to them or their culture. To better understand this, it has been suggested that we ask students how well information from the courses would apply to communication within their families. This would allow us to examine the salience of classroom concepts within situationally grounded cultural contexts outside of the classroom, which is of paramount importance.

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CONCLUSION

If one of the goals of our introductory communication course is to provide students with the information and skills necessary to make them more competent and adaptive communicators (Goss & O'Hair, 1988), then one way to accomplish this is to provide an appropriate role model for the students by demonstrating sensitivity, knowledge, and appreciation of cultural diversity. An instructor can do this by examining what is meant by "culture," their use of language, by considering the kind of assignments given, and by consulting a variety of resources to expand one's knowledge and understanding of cultural diversity in communication. We also suggest that instructors attempt to evaluate the success of the adaptations they have made. Throughout this paper we have focused on taking an ethnographic approach to these issues. That is, concentrating on the situational nature of communication and presenting and conducting comparative cultural analyses. These and many other instructional strategies will continue to be necessary if we are to offer introductory communication courses that will meet the needs of students entering increasingly multicultural universities and multicultural worlds. To prepare them for this, we must make sure they leave our courses knowing the importance of culture in human communication. Hymes (1972) put it best when he said "a satisfactory understanding of the nature and unity of (humans) must encompass and embrace, not abstract from, the diversity" (41).

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NOTES

¹According to *The Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac*, only the District of Columbia has a higher proportion of minority-group students in college (41%) (1990, p. 15).

²In all fairness, DeVito makes numerous attempts to remind the reader to be careful in generalizing with some of the findings presented in the text, e.g., “regulators are clearly culture-bound and not universal” (147), “this distance is still so short that it is not considered proper in public . . . (at least for Americans)” (157). However, despite these disclaimers, we wonder whether students are really able to resist overgeneralization.

³For an excellent source of studies such as these, see Bloch, P. (Ed.) *Political Language and Oratory in Traditional Society*.

⁴The cultural labels used in this section of the paper are the terms that individual student respondents used to refer to themselves.

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