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## Cross-cultural literacy: An American imperative

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## Cross-cultural literacy: An American imperative

### Abstract

The world is becoming a global village, say the experts. Just as individuals are dependent upon and, in turn, are depended on by their family, friends, and immediate communities, so are the nations of the world becoming highly interdependent (Brademas, 1987; Horne & Masson, 1988). The more this situation comes to pass, the more important does it become that we all make ourselves cross-culturally literate--that we become knowledgeable, that is, of the political and economic systems that exist around the world and of the many different ways people have of thinking, feeling, acting, and viewing things.

**CROSS-CULTURAL LITERACY: AN AMERICAN IMPERATIVE**

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**and Counseling**

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**by**

**Margaret Baird Davis**

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has been approved as meeting the research paper  
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### **Cross-Cultural Literacy: An American Imperative**

The world is becoming a global village, say the experts. Just as individuals are dependent upon and, in turn, are depended on by their family, friends, and immediate communities, so are the nations of the world becoming highly interdependent (Brademas, 1987; Horne & Masson, 1988). The more this situation comes to pass, the more important does it become that we all make ourselves cross-culturally literate--that we become knowledgeable, that is, of the political and economic systems that exist around the world and of the many different ways people have of thinking, feeling, acting, and viewing things.

It is not so difficult for most Americans to acknowledge that a great deal of interchange has been going on between the United States and other nations of the world. Witness, after all, the plethora of goods (cars, food items, appliances, articles of clothing, etc.) seen and used daily that bear brand names and other identification showing them to have originated in places as distant and exotic as Turkey, Yugoslavia, Madagascar, the Canary Islands, Romania, and Macao. What Americans might find hard to accept, however, is that, for the first time since World

War II, their country has become a debtor nation. As a result, their own political and economic future now depends to a considerable extent upon the policies, actions, and good will of others (Little, 1988; Madrid, 1988).

Such is the case as Americans continue to lower the production of goods within their own country and, increasingly, bring in goods from all corners of the world (Little, 1988). Not only does our country now import half of the machine tools its industries must have to keep themselves going, but as much as one-sixth of all its jobs rely, to one extent or another, on global trade and commerce (Dyal-Chand, 1988; G. T. Uselding, personal communication, January 12, 1989). Furthermore, this growing dependency on imported goods and international exchange occurs at a time when the United States faces stiffer competition from newer trade rivals, such as South Korea and China, as well as from older trade rivals, such as Europe.

Japan, however, is currently our most formidable competitor. Offering more foreign aid to developing countries than the United States, and already controlling "more ... world banking systems than the

Americans, British, and West Germans combined" (Hatcher, 1987, p. 13), Japan has so overtaken the United States in the production of compact and subcompact cars that it now assembles more such cars in this country than we do ourselves (The Economist, 1988). Having recently surpassed the United States in the production of semiconductors, too, it now claims six of the top ten companies in that \$50 billion-per-year industry, while the United States claims only three (The Washington Post, 1989). Outside of grain, education, and armaments, the only export item in which the United States still holds a comfortable lead, it would seem, is cigarettes (Goodwin & Nacht, 1983; Asiaweek, 1988).

As markets in which to buy raw materials and sell finished goods become progressively harder to find, and as the matter of the United States' global competitiveness becomes one of the top public policy issues with which our federal government must grapple, American business people need to realize that they must effect a considerable change of attitude in the way they relate to the other nationals with whom they do business. For starters, they need to recognize that exporting American goods for mass markets is

almost sure to backfire in countries where people have product needs and preferences quite different from our own (Patinkin, 1989), and where local businesses already have been established to cater to them. Americans also need to look at their tendency to give higher priority to short-term profits and maximum return on corporate stocks rather than to long-term market share and new product development (G. T. Uselding, personal communication, January 12, 1989). Additionally, they need "to be a little less cocky and a little more willing to learn lessons" from others (Prowse, 1987, p. 12). Not only should they be less "inward looking" and less "culturally and internationally naïve" (Welsh, 1989, p. 2), they should become more practiced in seeing things through the eyes of others.

This does not mean that Americans must "go native or lose ... (their) character" (Bing, 1988, p. 10). Rather, they should be more attentive, internationally, to their partners' concerns, their clients' preferences, and their competitors' capacities. And they could do worse, in this respect, than emulate the Japanese who, in the 1950s and 1960s, rather than enter foreign markets by building plants



and mass-producing goods there, first established trade offices and got to know their customers' needs and wants (G. T. Uselding, personal communication, January 12, 1989). Americans would also do well to heed the Japanese example of wooing clients by learning the clients' languages and customs. Not only is that a good way to carry out economic and commercial dealings with other nations, it is also an effective way to negotiate cooperatively with them on a multitude of worldwide problems, e.g., poverty, hunger, land shortages, and possible nuclear and ecological disaster.

AIDs is another problem that clearly calls out for global cooperation. Stretching national health care budgets far beyond their breaking points, the disease threatens, additionally, to cause as much as \$980 million in losses to debtor and creditor nations alike, by killing off half the productive population of several African countries (Heise, 1988). Crime, in the meantime, also exacts a heavy financial toll worldwide--not only drug-related crime and crimes of violence, but computer crime as well (San Segundo, 1988).

### **The Domestic Importance of Cross-Cultural Literacy**

In the United States today, minority children comprise over half the students in the public schools of our biggest metropolitan areas. Of the nine states expected to gain most in population, eight have populations that are 10%-30% minority, and the ninth (Hawaii) is almost entirely made up of an ethnic mix (Kosnett, 1989). By the year 2000, no less than 42% of all public school students will be "minority children or other children of poverty" (Schroeder, 1988, p. 1).

As minority-to-majority ratios in the United States continue to grow over the next several decades, Americans need to realize that cultural pluralism is certain to play an increasing role in this nation's economy. Some retail marketers already have learned that there are profits to be made in catering to the Hispanic, Asian, and other ethnic groups among us. They are also beginning to appreciate that members of these groups are both potential buyers and potential makers of their products (Edmondson, 1988).

### **The Importance of Cross-Cultural Literacy to Iowa**

In Iowa, meanwhile, there is a great deal more going on in the area of international business than

many people probably realize. For one thing, according to Noreen Fischer, Vice President of International Business Associates in Cedar Falls, "Cedar Rapids has this nation's highest per capita ratio for exports on a basis of manufactured goods" (personal communication, January 19, 1989). For another thing, explains Max Olson, Marketing Manager of International Trade for the Iowa Department of Economic Development (personal communication, January 11, 1989), Iowa companies export as much as \$5.3 billion worth of goods annually to 176 different countries, and the State ranks 17th nationally in total exports, even though it ranks only 27th in population. Contrary to popular opinion, only about 55% of those exports are made up of commodities like corn and beans, and the remaining 45% are made up of items like sporting goods, food processing equipment, materials-handling equipment, farm equipment, and more.

At the same time it is making its own presence known abroad (through trade offices it maintains in Germany, Hong Kong, and Japan), Iowa is beginning to feel the impact of foreign countries within its own borders. To date, 64 in-state companies (employing some 18,000 workers) have been bought up, wholly or in

part, by foreign firms, i.e.: Armstrong Tire of Des Moines by the Italian firm, Pirelli; Inter-State Assurance Co. of Des Moines by Irish Life PLC; Firestone of Des Moines by Bridgestone, a Japanese firm; Garst Seed Co. of Coon Rapids by a British firm; and Meta Baking of Sioux City by the Belgian firm, RT Holding S.A. (Kasler, 1989; M. Olson, personal communication, January 11, 1989). As a consequence, whether they remain in Iowa or move out of state to find challenging, remunerative employment, Iowa's college and university graduates can well expect to find themselves coming increasingly into contact with people of other cultures and heritages.

#### **How Pursue Cross-Cultral Literacy?**

A cross-culturally literate person is an individual who has an understanding of some of the cultural and national distinctions that exist in the world today and who has some understanding of how those distinctions affect people's thinking and behavior. Cross-cultural literacy includes an appreciation of other people's religious, philosophical, and world views--"the very cornerstones of their values, customs, and ways of thinking" (N. Fischer, personal communication,

January 19, 1989). It also includes some knowledge of the geography, economics, and political systems of other countries.

There is no one right way to work towards becoming cross-culturally literate. While one group of experts recommends that America's workers study Western Civilization (since it is, they say, the advanced, Western countries that will best be able to afford American goods), others suggest that our future workers pursue less Western-oriented studies, e.g., cultural anthropology, modern history, the history and cultures of developing nations, etc. While some experts opine that learning a foreign language is not of any great consequence because English has become a universal language, others maintain that learning one or more foreign languages is essential because it gives one some appreciation for how difficult it is for other nationals to converse, much less try to do business, in a language not their own. In deciding upon a course of cross-cultural studies to pursue, however, students may wish to give some consideration to how international business is conducted.

### **Cross-Cultural Literacy in Business Relationships**

In dealing with other nationals, the elements of trust, rapport, and mutual respect are vitally important to relationships. Without them, business simply does not get done. But, while social events are seen by Americans as ideal opportunities to work towards good business relationships, other nationals often consider it to be in poor taste to spend social time discussing business. And business leaders in other countries, who almost invariably belong to the well-educated elite classes, are not generally inclined to do business with individuals who are not, by their standards, their social and/or intellectual equals (N. Fischer, personal communication, January 19, 1989).

Simple common courtesy and common sense also dictate that Americans learn something about the languages, customs, and world views of others. Common courtesy signals that we respect others--their ideas, feelings, opinions, and viewpoints--and encourages those others, in turn, to be receptive to our feelings and viewpoints. Common sense leads us to consider the many practical applications of being cross-culturally literate. For instance, "when you're negotiating

with another group, and they speak your language and you don't speak theirs, who has the competitive advantage?" (Bing, 1988, p. 11). Among the many other practical reasons why people should make themselves cross-culturally literate when planning on doing business abroad are: (1) knowledge of the goods another country needs or has to offer will increase anyone's chances of doing business within that country; (2) knowledge of a country's political climate can be helpful in alerting business people to possible changes in leadership that might affect a country's receptivity towards a product; and (3) knowledge of a country's social customs can enable visitors to that country to anticipate unusual expenses they may have to incur when, as a result of the country's social, religious, or business practices, negotiations proceed more slowly than originally expected (N. Fischer, personal communication, January 19, 1989).

### Conclusion

There are various ways our institutions of higher education can promote cross-cultural literacy--e.g., exchanging teachers with other countries; offering formal and informal courses, lectures, seminars, etc. on a broad spectrum of multi-ethnic and multicultural

subjects; making study/internship abroad programs available to students; and more. Our colleges and universities would do well, though, to take better advantage of the international students on their campuses. These students have more to offer us than just cultural enlightenment. Indeed, like many of their countrymen before them--Corazón Aquino of the Philippines, Andreas Papandreou of Greece, Edward Seaga of Jamaica, Miguel de la Madrid and Carlos Salinas de Gortari of Mexico, the late José Napoleón Duarte of El Salvador, and King Birendra Bir Bikram Shad Dev of Nepal (Rentz, 1986)--a number of them are destined to become their countries' future political, commercial, and educational leaders. And all of them are "potential ... trading customers for U.S. products and potential suppliers of products to U.S. markets" (Gale, 1988, p. xi). Having lived in the United States and grown accustomed to our goods and conveniences, and having established a network of social and professional relationships here, they very often remain loyal to American products and practices (Goodwin & Nacht, 1984).

It is short-sighted of Americans not to maximize the educational potential of their international



students. While such short-sightedness may be a hold-over from this country's past practice of maintaining itself aloof from much of the rest of the world and of believing (as one Iowa student recently expressed it) that the word "international" does not include America or Americans, it is a hold-over we can ill afford to keep. The world is indeed changing and, if American businesses want to remain globally competitive, American workers must broaden their horizons to encompass knowledge of and appreciation for life beyond their own borders. They must also start looking at themselves as being members of not only local, state, and national communities but of global communities as well--whether those communities be socially, politically, or commercially based.

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