UNIT 16, CHAPTER 3

KNOWING THE TRUE FACE OF A MOUNTAIN: UNDERSTANDING COMMUNICATION AND CULTURAL COMPETENCE

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ABSTRACT

This essay expounds on the phenomenon of individuals' acquisition and development of cultural competence via the process of communication. It not only points out the importance of culture and communication in our lives, but also illuminates the close relationships between culture, communication, cultural literacy, and cultural competence. The author explains the commonly experienced difficulty in "knowing the true face" of one's culture, and provides an illustration of the communication process by which individuals are culturally programmed to perform what they do appropriately and effectively in a given culture.

INTRODUCTION

While visiting the magnificent and mysterious mountain of Lu, the famous Chinese Song dynasty poet Su Shi came to the understanding that he could not learn the Mountain's "true face" simply because he himself was in it. In a popular poem of his, the poet proclaimed: "Knowing not the true face of Lu Shan/For I am in its midst." Indeed, it is rather difficult for one to realize the scope and magnitude of a mountain when one is deep in it. The same, however, can be said of one's cultural competence since living in a culture is fairly similar to being deep in a mountain. It is often a significant challenge for us to be fully aware of our culturally acquired knowledge and behaviors because, in part, such knowledge and behaviors are generally perceived by people around us as "common," "natural," or "habitual."

Functioning as competent members in a given culture, contrary to what we would normally expect, does not necessarily help us to identify our cultural knowledge and behaviors. Much of the "true face" of a culture, or an individual's cultural competence lies deep underneath his/her level of consciousness and, as such, defies quick recognition by the person.

It is thus meaningful for us to understand what cultural competence is and how one obtains cultural knowledge and behaviors that are indeed indispensable to communicating effectively with others in a
cultural environment. We shall start by explaining what culture is and how culture and communication are closely related. We then move on to examine the nature of one's cultural knowledge that constitutes the person's cultural literacy. Further, we will illustrate the communication process in which one translates his/her cultural knowledge into cultural behaviors and, via the process of communicating with others one acquires his/her cultural competence. Finally, we will draw a conclusion for this writing.

**Culture and Communication**

Culture is indeed an evasive and complex concept. It is evasive because we are surrounded by culture and we live deep in it; in a practical sense, culture is the air and water we breathe and drink day in and day out. Since humans are fundamentally social beings, individuals cannot live without cultures of their own. Glen Fisher, for instance, once employed an analogy of an electronic computer to state that culture is comparable to the "programming" of an individual's mind.\(^1\) With this cultural programming, a person is then able to function appropriately and effectively in a given cultural context. Success and failure in interacting with others in a culture is then attributable to the types of programs contained in a person's brain. This comparison suggests that human cultures have both tangible and intangible contents. Tangible ones are therefore the hardware of a culture like those pointed out by Triandis and Albert as the "objective culture."\(^2\) Examples of the objective culture include such things like buildings, gardens, roads, tools, and so on. Intangibles, on the other hand, are the software of a culture or, according to Traindis and Albert, the "subjective culture." It is subjective because it includes those norms, roles, beliefs, values, and so forth that we have in our culture. Often, it is less difficult for us to notice the obvious differences and similarities of the tangibles in various cultures, whereas the differences and similarities of cultural intangibles are not as easy to discern.

Scholars interested in culture and communication often tend to define culture as a system. While some believe culture is a system of "abstract, man-made patterns,"\(^3\) others hold it as a "historically shared system of symbolic resources through which we make our world meaningful" (p.4).\(^4\) Still others argue that culture is "a negotiated set of shared symbolic systems that guide individuals' behaviors and incline them to function as a group" (p.26).\(^5\) Whether human culture is a shared system or a negotiated set of shared systems, in essence, it serves as a context in which we communicate. Culture tells us who we are, what positions we hold in our society, with whom and in what language we communicate. In this particular sense, individuals in a society are in fact cultural persons; each was born into a culture and grows up to become a cultural being.

Although all were born into a culture, by no means were we born with a culture. In other words, culture is not innate; rather, it is learned. Each of us acquires our culture while growing up, and the primary means by which we are enculturated is through communication. By communicating with those around us, we learn our languages, develop our worldviews, establish our values, and subscribe to our different beliefs. We also pass on to others our languages, worldviews, values, and beliefs. In fact, communication is the sole process by which humans acquire and transmit their individual cultures. George Borden (1991), for instance, proposed that we understand human communication as a system for "the sharing of information through meaningful symbols" (p.7). These meaningful symbols, of course, include both verbal and non-verbal codes utilized by a large group of people. Thayer (1987), on the other hand, called this meaning generating process our "communicational realities" that involve
"those ideas, beliefs, preferences, qualities, evils, and ideals which exist for us essentially because they can be and are talked about" (p. 172). For a human society, communication behaviors stand for social consciousness reflected in the verbal and non-verbal interactions among members. Thayer (1987) further believes that the essential function of our communication is to organize us socially in many different ways. In other words, "communicational realities" help form a social totality within which members of a society associate with each other in an effort to create meanings for themselves in their living environment.

Thus, it is quite clear that this meaning-creating process enables us, as members of a large group in a social environment, to understand, revitalize, and regenerate our cultures. The process of communicating with others, in this sense, requires the employment of culturally appropriate and effective knowledge and behaviors to accomplish our purposes in life. It is important however, to understand that, in order to be effective in realizing our intentions, our utilization of cultural knowledge and behaviors is regulated by rules that are agreed upon by members in the same cultural community. While we, as communicators in a particular cultural community, try to achieve our goals and intents, we engage simultaneously in the process of creating our cultural environment. Therefore, the process of communicating within a social environment is the process by which we create and pass on our cultures, and acquire cultural knowledge and behaviors that constitute cultural competence. Before we gain a better understanding of our acquisition of cultural competencies via communication, we must first understand what our cultural knowledge is composed of, that is, the contents of our cultural literacy.

**Cultural Literacy**

These days we frequently encounter terms related to literacy. "Media literacy," "computer literacy," and "information literacy" are just a few examples. Cultural literacy, however, refers to the basic knowledge that is required for individuals to interact meaningfully with one another in a large social group. Hirsch (1988) once stated, "To be culturally literate is to possess the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world" (p. xiii). He also considered the breadth of such basic information very extensive, covering all domains of human activity "from sports to science." Using reading as a case in point, Hirsch believed this kind of background information to be absolutely necessary in order for readers to obtain "an adequate level of comprehension, getting the point, grasping the implications, relating what they read to the unstated context which alone gives meaning to what they read" (p. 2). Similarly, Borden (1991) considered this context the "tacit knowledge" that one needs to function in a social/cultural environment. He cites the instance when a person understands all the words of a joke, but fails to get the point, as a good example to illustrate the necessity of background information in understanding a communication episode, that is, to get the joke. Without the context, or the tacit knowledge needed, one won't be able to comprehend the meaning of a simple joke. George Borden (1991) went one step further and argued, "If the joke is particular to a certain culture, then understanding it is a measure of literacy in that culture" (p. 179).

Thus, in Borden's (1991) view, a person is considered culturally literate when he/she possesses both the language codes and contextual knowledge of a social environment. While language codes include both verbal and non-verbal ones, contextual knowledge of a social environment refers to background information, cultural symbols and cultural processes. Unlike most linguists, communication researchers
consider both verbal and non-verbal codes important parts of a language. They argue that, like the verbal codes of a language, non-verbal codes also have structure, and are similarly organized according to a system of grammatical rules, syntax, and vocabulary (Knapp, 1980). Typically, non-verbal codes function to repeat, regulate, complement, substitute, emphasize, and, sometimes, to contradict a communicator's verbal messages (For more details, please consult other chapters regarding non-verbal codes in this collection of readings).

In addition to speaking the language of the group, a culturally literate person must also have contextual knowledge of the social environment in which he/she lives. In fact, it is more important to have contextual knowledge if we desire to communicate with others effectively. Without contextual knowledge of a culture, the use of language can often be rendered senseless. This scenario most frequently occurs when one uses a second language in a culture other than his/her own. For instance, Chinese (native speaker) English-speakers (second language user) often make the comment, "I think so," as a rather positive response. Thus, when an American English-speaker (native speaker) asks: "Do you like the class? " the Chinese English-speaker often responds with: "I think so." To the Chinese, his/her response is a very positive one; yet, to the American, the response is barely lukewarm. Both the use and comprehension of this particular comment in this situation require some contextual knowledge. With contextual knowledge, the Chinese English-speaker understands "I think so" is just not a very firm answer in America and, therefore, refrains from using it if a positive response is intended. On the other hand, contextual knowledge will also enable the American English-speaker to comprehend the positive meaning of the comment when a Chinese English-speaker offers it. In this communication episode, when both speakers have the required background information regarding the comment, they will understand each other much better.

Besides background information, understanding of cultural symbols is equally important to our contextual knowledge. Cultural symbols are objects selected by members of a culture to represent significant meanings in their communication, including metaphors and myths (Borden, 1991). In America, for example, red, yellow, pink and blue roses all have their symbolic meanings. It's not necessary to articulate, "I love you," in words when silently presenting a red rose conveys the same meaning. Another example is when a good committee comes into being, we often declare it "a committee from heaven." Otherwise, we could name it "a committee from hell." These metaphors are so common in every culture that Martin Gannon (2001) wrote a book about the cultural metaphors that he believes represent 23 nations in the world. 8

Further, all cultures subscribe to myths. Take the myth of technology in North America as an example. Foglesang (1982) stated that North Americans take "the myth of technology" very seriously. Technology is considered a necessity and benefit to everyone regardless of what it actually brings to the person. This is, in fact, a cultural myth because technology impacts upon our cultural behaviors as a large group. Many people believe, for instance, that computers will improve life no matter what they actually do to living.

A common myth is that the faster a computer runs, the better. Therefore, within the last ten years or so, I have updated my office computer more than five times. Each time, the new one runs much faster than the old. The computer I use now is thought to be many times faster than the one I used a decade ago.
Nevertheless, I never go home earlier. The point is that, in order to understand a technologically advanced society and to communicate effectively with its members, we need the contextual knowledge of how much technology is valued by North Americans.

Knowing the language and cultural symbols is not yet enough to make a person culturally literate. One also needs to have an understanding of the cultural processes. This means having the knowledge of when to say what to whom, and the appropriate manner of speaking. Having dinner in a restaurant is a good example to illustrate the concept of a cultural process. Not only does the person need to understand the language so as to read the menu and talk to the server, he/she must also understand the process of ordering food and enjoying the meal. While some researchers call this a schema (Markus, 1977), a prototype of culturally expected behaviors, others regard it as a plan or a communication script (Datan, Rodeheaver, and Hughes 1987; Trenholm and Jensen, 1995) for an occasion. Careful observations of daily communication with others will inform us that we have plans and scripts for almost every social circumstance. Yet, knowing is not behaving; having knowledge of the language and context of a culture may make us culturally literate, but not culturally competent, for competence is the translation of knowledge into behaviors. The topic of cultural competence and how it is acquired follows.

**Cultural Competence and Communication Processes**

To be competent is to be appropriate and effective; to be culturally competent is, therefore, to be appropriate and effective in a given cultural context. For instance, in the United States, when a party is over, the guests are expected to leave. However, if one or two linger around while the host/hostess have other more important things to do, what should be done? Pushing the guest out of the door and yelling: "Get out of here! The party is over!" will be effective for sure, yet it is not appropriate. Another choice for the host/hostess under this circumstance is, of course, to be extremely patient and wait for the guest(s) to leave. This alternative is more appropriate, but it is the least effective in regard to the host/hostess's plan. The key lies in being both appropriate and effective in communicating one's purpose, and doing so requires cultural competence.

To be culturally competent means one translates cultural knowledge into culturally appropriate and effective behaviors. From a communication perspective, behaviors are either verbal or nonverbal. While verbal competence refers to an individual's proficiency in language use, nonverbal competence concerns the application of nonverbal codes to cultural contexts. Regarding the acquisition of a particular language, there are normally two ways for individuals to obtain it: naturally and deliberately. Most of us learn our first language naturally, that is, hearing and speaking it while growing up in our homes. The first language is often called the "mother tongue," or learned from one's mother.

The acquisition of a second language is usually deliberate. One starts with learning vocabulary and grammatical rules. Then, one moves on to learn more complicated expressions and situational applications. In second language acquisition, the biggest challenge to many learners is not vocabulary, proper pronunciation, and correct application of grammatical rules; rather, the greatest difficulty is the acquisition of cultural knowledge of the language, or "cultural language" (Wang, 1999-2000). For instance, when invited to an American family for dinner and asked if hungry or not, American guests' cultural language often is: "Yes, we're starving!" so as to indicate the desirability of the host/hostess's food. However, a common answer from a Japanese native speaker who uses English as a second
language is not "We're starving." The Japanese guests' use of the English language may be perfect in vocabulary, pronunciation, and application of grammatical rules; yet, "cultural language" may not be appropriate. The Japanese guests' verbal behaviors may be considered culturally incompetent under this circumstance due to limited use of "cultural language." In summary, a person may be linguistically competent as gauged by his/her choice of words, articulation, and application of grammatical rules of a particular language, yet, he/she is not culturally competent if his/her comment is inappropriately offered in a given cultural context.

Likewise, the acquisition of culturally appropriate non-verbal behaviors is also accomplished naturally and deliberately. Most of us acquire the non-verbal behaviors of our first language and culture naturally while growing up. We often obtain our second language and culture non-verbal behaviors deliberately. For example, most American males acquire their business handshake via the natural process of communicating with others. To the best of my knowledge, there are no classes in the United States teaching people how to perform the business handshake with people like bankers. Yet, we all know how to shake that hand firmly and gently squeeze it for a second in the middle of the shaking, particularly when we desire that loan from a banker. Second culture non-verbal behaviors must be deliberately learned. For example, there are workshops to teach Japanese business bows to Americans who go to Japan on business ventures. Japanese bows are more complicated than the American handshake due to the various ways to bow on various occasions to people of different status and seniority.

More importantly, culturally appropriate and effective verbal and non-verbal behaviors are, deliberately or naturally, acquired through the process of communication. By communicating with others, we learn languages and, therefore, acquire linguistic competence. Non-verbal behaviors and behavioral competence are similarly acquired. In the discipline of communication, scholars consider culturally appropriate and effective behaviors as communication competence (Rubin, 1990). Appropriate and effective behaviors in cultures other than our own are considered intercultural communication competence (Lustig & Koester, 1996). Communication plays a pivotal role in our acquisition of cultural competence. Via communication, not only do we acquire our cultural knowledge and behaviors, we also transmit our cultural knowledge and behaviors to generations to follow. A culturally competent person is a culturally competent communicator, and a cross-culturally competent person is a cross-culturally competent communicator.

Conclusion

In this essay, the elements that contribute to culturally competent communication within one's own culture were identified. Usually, cultural competence is taken for granted until people travel to places where the culture is different. Then, they discover how clumsy and ineffective they are in the new environment. Generally, most of our culturally acquired knowledge and behaviors are unconscious. People are seldom aware of the cultural knowledge and behaviors they have acquired while growing up.

The cultural knowledge and behaviors acquired while growing up constitute cultural literacy. Without cultural literacy, individuals find themselves lacking the knowledge to comprehend the meanings of interactions within a given cultural context. A person must have acquired language codes and contextual knowledge of a social environment to communicate effectively and appropriately. While language codes
include both verbal and non-verbal messages, contextual knowledge encompasses background information, cultural symbols and awareness of cultural processes. All are important to effective communication.

It is clear that communication and acquisition of cultural competence are closely related to each other. In communication, one not only learns knowledge of a particular culture, but also obtains culturally appropriate and effective behaviors, including both verbal and non-verbal conduct. Indeed, communication is indispensable and plays a critical role in our acquisition and development of cultural competence.

About the Author

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References


Notes

6 Italics added by this writer.

Suggested Websites

1. www.casanet.org/library/culture/competence.htm
Questions for Discussion

1. Try to work out your own definition of culture. What do you think of the importance of culture and its effect on us?
2. Are you aware of your culturally acquired knowledge and behaviors? If you are, describe the process by which you have come to know the "true face" of your culture. If you are not, try to describe some of the ways by which you can get to know the "true face" of your culture.
3. Why does the author of this essay claim that culture and communication are closely related? Do you agree with him? Why or why not?
4. The author also argues that "tacit knowledge" is of fundamental importance in individuals' comprehension of a communication episode. Try to give examples from your own experiences to illustrate the importance of "tacit knowledge" in our communicative activities.
5. What do you think of the role of communication in our acquisition and development of cultural competence? Try to use your own examples to demonstrate.
6. In your opinion, what constitutes a person's cultural literacy? Is it possible for us to measure an individual's level of cultural literacy? If so, how?
7. The author contends that a culturally competent person is a culturally competent communicator and a cross-culturally competent person is a cross-culturally competent communicator. Do you agree with him, and what does this mean to you?