



Journal of Hospitality, Leisure,  
Sport & Tourism Education

Vol. 6, No. 2.

ISSN: 1473-8376

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PRACTICE PAPER

## Developing Intercultural Communication: A University Project

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DOI:10.3794/johlste.62.167

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### Abstract

With an increasingly complex, diverse and mobile workforce, the need for intercultural communication and cultural awareness is greater than ever. Yet few higher education programmes presently provide these skills to students. This paper outlines the necessity for intercultural communication within higher education, and describes the process of the creation of a project designed to provide enhancement of the quality of teaching and learning and student support through an intercultural communication staff training programme. The intended long-term outcomes of the project were: 1) the development of a structured resource base for staff to address/alleviate diversity-related conflict; and 2) an enhanced student experience resulting in higher student retention and course satisfaction.

**Keywords:** Intercultural communication; Internationalisation

### Introduction

Of course there's lots of knowledge in Universities: the first year students bring a little in, the final years don't take much out, so knowledge kind of accumulates.

*A. Lawrence Lowell*

The above quote sums up the approach to intercultural communication in higher education in the sense that everyone who comes to university has their own background and experiences of dealing with other cultures. While they are at university the variety of diversity students encounter increases. And when they graduate they take only a little bit of that knowledge and insight into human diversity with them. But what I would suggest they are not getting is an understanding of intercultural communication. Therefore graduates lack the ability to

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recognise and use the knowledge and experience of diversity they have acquired at university. This is the stall I'm setting out.

Nearly none of us were taught, and we are not teaching our students, how to manage cultural differences and intercultural conflict, or how to operate most effectively in intercultural settings. The purpose of this paper is to generate awareness of intercultural communication, advocate for incorporating intercultural communication into the curriculum/student experience, and to reflect upon the development of a project in intercultural communication project at the University of Plymouth.

At a practical level, intercultural communication is about how to live with and manage as effectively as possible those who aren't like you. It looks at culture-specific behaviours and the cumulative effect of miscommunication between people who perceive and interpret specific behaviours differently. With an increasingly complex, diverse and mobile workforce, this is surely something we all could do with?

Yet how many readers of this paper are converts to intercultural communication and know what it is all about? How many have heard of, for example, Geert Hofstede? I'm sure a few readers have because they retain an interest in the subject if they are taking the time to read this, but they are the converted. Nevertheless, how many readers teach intercultural communication to your students? How many were taught intercultural communication as part of their studies as a student or received training on the job? Not very many I expect. Somewhat ironically, I wasn't taught it either. I say ironically because the field of intercultural communication incorporates concepts and research from fields such as anthropology, linguistics, psychology and communications, and my education background as an applied anthropologist incorporated many of these areas, but I was not exposed to it. Awareness of intercultural communication came through chatting with a Dutch colleague who teaches intercultural communication over a few beers five years ago. As she talked about intercultural communication, I became more interested and wanted to find out more. I began searching for, and found, an intercultural communication training course run by Bernadette van Houten at Consultants Interculturele Communicatie. I secured some grant funding to pay for the course and my keep, and spent a fantastic week immersed in intercultural training in Amsterdam. I came back to work a fully fledged intercultural communication convert, and began to build elements of intercultural communication into my teaching of tourism management students, gave a few workshops to academics, and was encouraged to apply (successfully) for a university teaching fellowship, which supported the project discussed later.

As humans we are much more alike than different, but we don't think in terms of how alike we are, we think in terms of difference. Difference is what we notice. And difference is what creates conflict. So human beings can either become all alike, or we can accept and understand differences in terms of values and ways of life and aim to take the more difficult route of living alongside each other. Or, what appears to be most common, different groups can live alongside each other without understanding themselves or each other, and face a continued future of distrust and antipathy. The aim of intercultural communication is to address the second of these scenarios. Intercultural communication is not about assimilation. There is no suggestion that we are all converging towards some common 'good'. Rather, the basic premise is that different groups of people have different values, and therefore each group will follow its own path. The aim of intercultural communication is thus to create awareness and, more important, understanding, not agreement. This is particularly so in terms of solving intercultural conflict.

Let me give a practical example. A couple of years ago I encountered a minor intercultural conflict with an overseas student. I found myself telling an overseas student for about the twentieth time not to address me as Dr Butts. 'Just call me Steve,' I said to them, with some exasperation. But then later I thought to myself, why don't I want them to call me Dr Butts, when they obviously are not comfortable calling me Steve? The answer is, in terms of

fundamentals, I originate from and was largely educated in the United States, which is a low power-distance society that values equality, and as such I do not wish to place artificial barriers/distance between myself and my students. The student in question was from a high power-distance/strongly hierarchical society, where they would never have dreamt of calling an instructor by their first name, ever. So the next time I saw the student we stopped and had a chat and I explained to them why I didn't wish to be called Dr Butts, and we talked about how students would normally address instructors in their home country, and why that was the case.

Thus, through generating awareness about ourselves and each other, and by talking to each other, we were able to resolve this minor cultural conflict. What actually happened afterwards was the student sometimes called me Steve and sometimes Dr Butts. But imagine how this example of a seemingly innocent and minor cultural conflict could have been blown completely out of proportion. Imagine if I thought the student was making fun of me by calling me Dr Butts when all the other students called me Steve, that the student was using the 'Doctor' sarcastically. One of my jobs is writing references for graduates. If I thought the student was a mocking smart-arse, that could come through in the references I wrote, and could have negatively affected their employment or future study prospects. I don't wish to belabour this example any further, but it is most often the case that cultural conflicts arise from a simple lack of understanding, of understanding oneself, of others, and failing to communicate that understanding. Through the process of self-awareness, awareness of others and communication, most cultural conflicts can be resolved.

By awareness, I am not talking about recognising that someone comes from a different culture and may have different norms and values. Intercultural communication is about understanding where those norms and values come from, what the drivers are in how people form their attitudes, morals and values. Since education is being discussed here, intercultural communication helps us to understand why students often self-segregate in groups along cultural lines. Probably all readers have had the experience of going into a university canteen and seeing a group of Chinese, Spanish or others for whom English is not their first spoken language sitting together speaking in their native tongue, surrounded by other groups of native English speakers, and thinking to themselves, I wish the students would integrate more with each other. What you probably haven't considered is that those non-native English speakers might be sitting together because they are tired owing to language fatigue. It is physically tiring to speak in a language in which you are not completely fluent. Thus, for our group of non-native English speakers, sitting only with others who speak their own language is the same as having a break.

Similarly, language fatigue can set in for native English speakers who talk with someone who's English is not fluent because they must pay more attention to what is being said. What human beings tend to do when confronted with someone with whom it is difficult to communicate is switch off and to avoid them whenever possible. And I would bet every person reading this can think of an instance when they have done just that - you see that student or colleague coming toward you whom you can barely understand and you hope like hell they aren't coming to talk to you. Knowledge of language exertion is just a very tiny part of what intercultural communication has to offer, but now that you the reader have become self-aware just from reading this, the next time you are confronted with someone you have difficulty understanding, you are more likely to try harder. And that helps individuals to move towards the aim of intercultural communication, which is about creating understanding so that people moving from one culture to another, or working with others from another culture, can apply that knowledge and live and work effectively with folks who are different from them.

## **Intercultural communication: project development**

Be always careful not to take too much from an experience. A cat, having sat upon a hot stove lid, will never again sit upon a hot stove lid. Nor upon a cold stove lid.

*Mark Twain*

As stated previously, due to the inherent change and mobility in employment opportunities and the workforce within Europe, and indeed the world, at least at some level, the desirability of intercultural communication and cultural awareness is obvious. And you would think that academics everywhere, no matter what the discipline, would think the same. But here it is suggested that in reality they do not, at least not to a sufficient level of depth to be useful. However, this is not a case of 'Little Britain' for those who have seen the television programme or are familiar with the metaphor; it is a case that academic staff just don't know. Consider this as an example. At your institution can you go along and ask an academic in a science faculty if they think they ought to be teaching intercultural communication to, say, their biology students? You probably can't, and the reason for this is because your colleagues don't have the currency of language to be able to discuss if their students would benefit from being exposed to intercultural communication. You can't ask people to comment on what they haven't been informed about, which leads to the discussion of the project.

Rather than hitting academic colleagues from across my institution head on and telling them, 'You ought to be doing this' (one way to ensure an academic will never do something is to tell them what you think they ought to be doing), I decided to be more subtle and to try to show them what they could do. I began, in the beginning, with induction. In the months before the start of term I prepared and distributed to staff involved in new student induction three relatively light-hearted PowerPoint presentations with lots of interesting pictures and a few simple exercises. These presentations were designed to be self-explanatory and created so that absolutely anyone, whether or not they knew anything about intercultural communication or cultural awareness, could show them to their students to get them thinking about how they deal with strangers, intercultural conflict and issues of culture shock and adjustment. Staff were told to beg, borrow, steal or manipulate these PowerPoint presentations any way they saw fit. Did everyone take up the offer? Of course not, but some did.

The next step in the project required the identification of members of academic staff willing to be trained and return in the future to act as trainers for other staff. My intention was to get a group of 12 to 20 staff from across the various faculties in the university willing to give up four days of their academic year to receive intercultural communication training. The intention was not to make them 'experts', but to provide them with enough knowledge and activities to enable them to feel comfortable to participate in, or put on, their own one-day, half-day or half-hour training programmes, whichever was most appropriate. This will not come as a surprise to many, but getting those 12 to 20 academic staff was the single most difficult hurdle for the project.

Asking academic staff to do anything new, or extra, is always a challenge. And I made it harder by saying to staff, not only do you have to learn something new, you've got to give up a few days to be trained this year, and then ideally I want you to spend more of your time next year training more people. So I sent a couple of calls for participants across the university, and picked up a few folks. I then started selling it to folks I knew personally across the university, and this is what yielded most of the final group of 16 participants. In the end, as so often is the case, it came down to personal relationships. Because they knew and trusted me, colleagues believed me when I told them that it would be a great experience, and that is why most agreed to participate. It also didn't hurt when I told them I would also be providing a very high quality lunch – if you feed them well, they will come.

My task then was to take a somewhat sceptical but willing group of academics and convert them into intercultural communication zealots. So I again made contact with Bernadette van Houten and brought her in to do an initial two days of training. And she wowed them, which I knew she would. The typical comments as staff walked out of the room after two intensive days of training was: 'That was the best staff development course I've ever done' and 'How can we bring this to everyone?' They were converted.

So I had created a resource in the form of this pool of academic staff with common knowledge. But how do we get the message out to the rest of the academic staff, support staff and, of course, the point of it all ultimately, the students? And while it may not seem like it from what I've been discussing, the ultimate goal of the project being discussed is to raise intercultural communication and cultural awareness among the students, so they are best placed in their future careers, wherever they end up.

Nevertheless, the cold hard reality is that anyone who works in higher education works with people who are bigoted against women, men, Chinese, American, brown-skinned, gay or some other labelled people. Is intercultural communication training going to make the real extremists become open-minded and accepting of everyone? Probably not. As individuals, we are not all starting at the same point in terms of intercultural awareness and communication, but even those who already have open minds can benefit. For example, one of my colleagues who attended the training session told me the day after it finished that he'd had an international student come to see him about her work and, as a result of the training, which had opened his eyes to things he had never even thought about before, he was much more patient, thought about how he was communicating, considered the language he was using in terms of idioms and metaphors, and was much more attuned to the way in which he communicated with that student. It was not the case that he wasn't culturally sensitive before, but the training had provided an opportunity to reflect upon and enhance his intercultural communication skills. It is important to point out here that intercultural communication does not provide answers. There is no set of rules that, if followed, will enable you to communicate interculturally with anyone, and this is why some people are resistant to it. It is a bit like studying philosophy in that the more you know, the more you realise how little you know and how much effort is involved to discover more.

If I had my way, I would try and find a way to require all staff at my institution to attend intercultural communication training, but I don't have my way, so we have to try something else. At my institution we have a rolling and well-publicised staff development programme, and we are offering intercultural communication through that programme next academic year. We are also actively promoting our services to provide intercultural training to any group of academic or support staff, including the students' union. Another tactic employed was to become involved in the new staff training programme. As most readers will be aware, recently qualified teaching staff are required to attend and pass a Learning and Teaching in Higher Education qualification. Everyone who attends this course now gets a session on intercultural communication. They are quite literally a captive audience – and informed of further staff development options.

The point of the project is not to make everyone across the institution experts in intercultural communication. I wouldn't profess that I am an expert. Rather, the goal is to raise awareness among all staff in some of the principles that intercultural communication has to offer, how to manage diversity and ultimately to impart at least some knowledge to all our students, no matter what discipline they are studying.

To wrap up, all the things that are being done to raise intercultural communication and cultural awareness are, in many ways, small things. I work in an institution with thousands of staff and tens of thousands of students. I would suggest that, in an environment such as a higher education institution in England, something considered 'new-fangled' like intercultural communication isn't going to get anywhere without a champion. At the University of Plymouth we are lucky in that in there is a group of champions and institutional will. What the project has done is to provide an opportunity to build a slightly wobbly platform from which we can work to tip the balance of the population of the institution from one of relative blissful ignorance of intercultural communication and awareness.

One way or another, most higher education students are exposed to the notion that it is important to understand cultural differences, but we are sending students out at the end of their education poorly equipped to deal with those differences and issues of intercultural

conflict. Simple understanding that cultures are different is not enough. Very few students are receiving even basic knowledge or tools to deal with intercultural communication or conflict, or to transfer such knowledge and tools to others with whom they work. In other words, most higher education programmes are sending their graduates out to a working environment where it is anticipated that most will be working in culturally diverse settings in terms of colleagues and populations, and providing them with nothing to help them flourish in a diverse environment.

In the world in which we live, it is patently ridiculous that higher education programmes in any discipline are churning out students without exposing them at least to the principles of intercultural communication and some tools for understanding. The road to full acceptance of intercultural communication and awareness by higher education staff, let alone students, is a long and weary one. But, apart from personal benefit, every step a member of staff takes down that road ultimately is passed on and enhances the chances for their students, and that's why we're all here. So go on, take a few steps, and get a colleague or two to walk with you.