

What's in a Word? Findings from Experiential Group Intercultural Communication Projects

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Objectives: To compete and be successful in the world businesses, no matter at what level of employment, employees need intercultural communication competency skills. As many universities teach theories about intercultural communication, the researchers created an experiential exercise designed to make students apply this theoretical knowledge.

Methods: We paired students from a Business Communication course in the United States with a similar course in Germany for group projects. For each course with between 25 and 30 students, teams of two or three members were formed. Students experienced intercultural communication in their teams by working to create policies for a new company formed by the merger of a German and an American company. The project taught the students that the theories alone were not enough to make a global team effective. Students were tasked to keep track of all communications, which were then discussed in class.

Results: One of the most interesting results lay in how the exact use of specific words could change the communication. Specific and direct knowledge of how each culture used specific phrases and terms is vital for the group to communicate well and go beyond differences to achieve results.

Conclusions: Teaching intercultural communication competency skills with experiential projects allows students to be prepared for the reality of today's workplace. It does help educators understand that incorporating experiential intercultural projects within coursework is not optional; it is vital to the students' post-graduation success.

Key Words: Intercultural Communication, Word Usage, German-American Communication, Global Team Communication, Communication Barriers

Introduction

In 2015, the Society for Human Resource Management noted that a global mindset is crucial, no matter where an employee

is located. In the past, an organization's leaders, managers and employees needed to understand a culture only if they were going to another country to live. Now, employees work virtually across borders via technology, they work with a variety of ethnicities at home, and they interact with a globally dispersed customer base. So a global mindset and skills are necessary for all employees (para. 2).

As early as 2003, scholars such as Schneider and Barsoux (2003) and Brake (2006) noted that virtual and international communication and shared projects were becoming standard in the workplace and that graduates should be prepared to work in intercultural teams. Many colleges and universities, aware that

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business today is increasingly global and that more than ever before employees will most likely be working with colleagues who do not share their culture or nationality, are including intercultural communication courses in their curriculum. Drawing on the works of scholars such as Deardorff (2009), Lewis (2006), Hall (1990) and Hofstede (1991), these courses aim to impart knowledge about intercultural differences and ways to overcome these differences. Researchers such as Hannon and D'Netto (2007), however, have pointed out that theoretical knowledge is inadequate.

As Crossman and Bordia (2012) noted, “business schools have a responsibility to introduce students to theoretical and experiential perspectives in online and intercultural communication” and “the transfer of theoretical knowledge to work context can best happen through experiential learning (p. 83).” According to a 2017 study by Forbes, Inc., in 2016, 500 companies earned roughly two-thirds of the GDP in the U.S. and 37% of the world's GDP – nearly \$28 trillion in revenue and over \$1.5 trillion in profit. Furthermore, these companies alone employ over 67 million people who come from 34 countries (Fortune, 2017). The Pew Research Trust cited the United States Bureau of Economic Analysis report that small to mid-sized companies were also increasingly global, with the number of U.S. workers employed by foreign-owned companies rising 22% over an eight-year period, compared to the average of a 3.6% percent increase in employment in U.S.-owned firms in the U.S. (para. 1). The world's businesses are just that: world businesses. To compete and be successful in these world businesses, no matter at what level of employment, employees need intercultural communication competency skills.

According to our own observation, based on teaching international students and adult students employed in multicultural workplaces and consulting internationally owned businesses based in the US, is that Hannon and D'Netto (2007) are correct. To test this observation, we designed an experiential group project that was comprised of students from both sides of the Atlantic.

Our students studied the theories developed by the scholars listed above; we also discussed how these theories work and also how they could be impacted by the advent of the internet. We ourselves believe that while many intercultural communication differences noted in these early theories have been lessened by the internet and an increase in professionals seeking employment outside of their own country, many differences still remain. Therefore, to see if we were correct, we applied a theoretical approach in our research.

Methods

For the group projects, 25–30 students of each business communication course in Germany and the United States were divided into groups of two or three. Each group was assigned to write a new policy for the human resources department for a new company; the policy was required to cover the laws of both countries as well as take into account the culture of each. While students thought the aim of the assignment was the creation of the policy, in reality, the learning outcome was to experience working virtually with people from another culture.

Students were to write papers and give presentations about not only the policies they had created but also any roadblocks or difficulties they had encountered due to intercultural communication. If the communication had gone well, they also were to report that fact. In each case, independent of the difficulty level, they were to analyze first whether the intercultural theories they had studied had helped their understanding. Students were to keep a record of each e-mail, chat, or dialogue in a videoconference; they could do the latter by recording the videoconference.

The assignment spanned a total of four weeks. During this time, students were communicating and working outside of class with their team members in both the home country and the partner country. Every time they met as a class, the professor would have them report their progress but also discuss intercultural communication itself. Professors would then probe to help students reach a deeper understanding of applied theoretical behavior as well as become aware of their own behavior and cultural biases.

All, or at least most, of the communication between the team members during the project took place in English; the German students had a requirement that their English be of a high level to be able to remain enrolled in the program. In one instance, a group member in the United States could speak fluent German. The Americans found themselves relying on this student to help them communicate, which in turn made them realize the need for Americans to be fluent in at least one language other than English.

For the purposes of this paper, we concentrated our analysis on specific instances where words or phrases themselves hindered the communication. By observing how specific words could turn a comprehensible conversation into an incomprehensible one, we were able to help our students realize how culturally influenced their communication was and how they needed to move beyond that cultural safety net to communicate in a global world.

Results

What became apparent very quickly was that communication confusion occurred in generally three areas: idiomatic use of terms, different definition of the same word or phrase, and cases where the word was spelled exactly the same but meant different things in the two languages. While students were looking for instances in their communication where cultural norms and behaviors would differ, they were not prepared to encounter these three areas of differences.

Americans, for instance, were unaware that many of their communication choices were idiomatic and may be incomprehensible to their German counterparts. Phrases such as “at the end of the day” and “his direct report” are very common terms used in business in the United States, yet they are uncommon in the English used in other countries. In the United States, “at the end of the day” can mean literally the end of the work day, but more often is interpreted idiomatically as “at the end of the project, when we have debriefed and seen what needs to be done now.” In the initial discussion between the groups from the two countries, one of the Americans used the phrase, intending it to mean the latter. The Germans, however, took the phrase to mean literally the end of that day. To adjust for the time difference between the two countries, the conference took place after 7 p.m. in Germany; because of the idiomatic use of the phrase and the confusion it caused, the Germans were taken aback at what appeared to them a condition that the entire project’s work be completed literally at the end of the day on which the initial Skype conference was held.

Similar confusion arose with the term “his direct report.” In the United States, this term has come to mean idiomatically “a person whose position is directly below another person’s in an organizational chart.” To the Germans, however, the phrase carried the meaning of “a report written directly by him.” Confusion occurred until one of the German students asked for clarification as to how to cite the report written by this person.

A final example of the confusion caused by unconscious use of idiomatic phrases in intercultural communication occurred in the initial videoconference. The student was presenting information about the newly created sexual harassment policy. The student used the phrase “jump your bones,” an idiomatic phrase meaning “to have sex with.” The Germans had not heard the term and were confused as to what the student was trying to convey. Only because the conference was on video did the Americans realize that the Germans were questioning among themselves as to the meaning of the term and that the Americans needed to explain the term. This explanation then required the Americans to explain workplace harassment regu-

lations to the Germans, who have more general anti-discrimination laws, and who did not understand that by law an American company doing business on foreign soil still needs to comply with American law. Had the conference been via telephone or e-mail, the confusion could likely have continued and thwarted true understanding of the policy itself.

Definitions of the words used also created confusion. While discussing American policies towards the open display of tattoos and other body enhancements, the Germans described the Americans as “old-fashioned.” In this case, they were trying to convey that contemporary society has accepted more liberal attitudes towards body enhancements. Instead, Americans felt they were being seen as backward and intolerant. In this context, the Germans’ direct communication style was considered rude by the Americans while the Germans sometimes found the American tendency to “beat around the bush” rather than openly exchange criticism frustrating and ineffective.

A final instance of confusion in which a word that was spelled and pronounced the same in English and in German occurred with the word “long.” The German word translates to English as “tall.” Yet in the United States, the word does not imply height. Instead, it usually is an adjective that implies distance, something measured on the ground, as in “travelling a long way to get here.” In current American slang, however, it has another meaning. Describing someone as “long” in American slang has a sexual reference. In both languages, people can have “Long” as a surname. So when one German introduced himself by saying that his last name was Long and that he was indeed long, he meant he was indeed tall. But the Americans took his statement to be an inappropriate joke and felt reluctant to continue the group work with this young man. Not until the American students returned to class to discuss the communication in the meeting did the confusion and misinterpretation of the remark become clear.

Discussion

While many universities believe that studying the theories of intercultural communication is necessary preparation for anyone who plans to enter or is already in the workforce, our research indicates that theoretical knowledge is not enough. In fact, only experiential communication assignments without close attention to wordings and phrases in communication is also not enough. Cultural differences and different uses of words occur even within the same country; what is called a shopping cart in some parts of the United States is called a shopping buggy in others, for instance, while a bread roll in one region of Germany is called something entirely different in another. As our

investigation shows, sometimes just one word or phrase can turn the atmosphere and reception of an entire conversation in a different and most likely negative direction. Therefore, teaching intercultural communication theories is only the first step. Detailed explorations of different communication styles, words, and phrases is necessary. If these findings became clear in just two reiterations of an experiential assignment group project, we anticipate that further investigation will confirm this finding.

English is the lingua franca of global trade and the dominant language in international business. For this reason, countries throughout the world begin teaching English to students from an early age. In Germany, English instruction begins in elementary school, and university students can claim at least 10 years of English language instruction by their freshmen year. Despite their proficiency in English, in collaborating with their American counterparts, German students experienced similar hurdles to the ones German executives at BMW faced with their British counterparts at Rover during the merger between the two companies. While the Germans complained that they had difficulties interpreting what the English meant, the British counterparts pointed out that although they spoke very good English, the Germans had more difficulty understanding the language.

As native speakers, Americans are placed at an advantage in international collaborations. They dominate the discussions and set the tone and pace for interactions. We observed that non-native speakers hesitate to ask questions or do not admit to having not understood for fear of losing face. Since no questions or objections are raised, the American counterparts assume that everyone is in agreement, which may lead to misunderstandings, frustration, and even failure to reach an agreement. The American students experienced this phenomenon first-hand while interacting with their German counterparts.

During the experiential exercise, students from both sides of the Atlantic were encouraged to make better use of communication tools to help facilitate understanding. German students learned the importance of asking questions or repeating what had been said. A member of the team was chosen to take notes of the discussions and post them on a collaborative platform or send them to members through e-mail. They were made aware of the need to use polite forms of expression and exercise diplomacy when expressing criticism.

The American students, on the other hand, recognized the need to avoid euphemisms, metaphors, and colloquial language. They learned to engage their non-native team members more and dominate the conversation less. The difficulties of using humor and references to American culture, such as the winner of the Super Bowl, for small talk became apparent to them.

Through actual interaction with their foreign counterparts rather than textbook illustrations and theoretical discussions, our students faced real-life challenges and developed constructive solutions for facilitating intercultural communication.

Conclusion

Teaching intercultural communication competency skills with experiential projects allows students to be prepared for the reality of today's workplace. It also allows them to internalize how small differences, such as in the interpretation of words, matters often as much as understanding the basic tenets of a culture. While our research is by no means extensive or conclusive, it does help educators understand that incorporating experiential intercultural projects within coursework is not optional; it is vital to the students' post-graduation success.

While the results of this study yielded many interesting results, one of the most interesting lay in how the exact use of specific words could change the communication. Although the students of both countries primarily spoke English during the videoconferences and in e-mail, because of the differences in the cultural interpretation of these English terms, what appeared on the surface as an innocuous use of language actually resulted in misinterpretation and confusion, thereby underscoring the importance of cultural communication competence.

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