THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURE UPON COMMUNICATION

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Introduction
Is culture important in educational processes? As the title of this paper implies, it can be important when cultural differences make communication between teachers, students or parents difficult. In our everyday lives many of us have experienced how differences in cultural values block understanding – for example, how many of us have been irritated because an obviously foreign driver was not driving like other drivers. A cultural difference may have been the reason – in some countries drivers are very aggressive whereas in others they are very polite; in one way, driving is an expression of core cultural values. In this paper we’ll look at some concepts about culture, consider how culture might block communication and ways to gain some perspective on communication barriers; what can we use when wanting to communicate with someone of a different cultural background.

The words “The way we do things around here”\(^{1}\) is a quick and simple definition of culture. A more detailed definition gives us more information; for this article, the following of definition is used:

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\text{Culture is made up of shared assumptions, values, and beliefs of a group of people which result in characteristic behaviors.}
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Newborn members of a culture gradually begin to learn assumptions, values, and beliefs as they grow and acquire their language skills. Parents, older siblings, relatives and others pass on cultural rules through conversation and behaviors at this critical learning time. To varying degrees, those who enter a culture later in their lives also learn cultural rules – generally speaking the younger a person starts the more proficient they become.

A critical part of this definition is implied – it is that cultural assumptions, values and beliefs are often unwritten. Members of a culture know their culture’s assumptions, values, and beliefs yet have difficulty explaining them to others. “Lagom” is a Swedish word that can be labeled an assumption, value and belief. Think of how the word’s meaning might be explained to someone who knows nothing of Swedish culture. It’s not that easy to create a simple definition that contains all the possible meanings of the word. Who, what, when, where and how contribute to defining exact meaning. This is true again and again when it comes to cultural assumptions, values and beliefs in communication with outsiders.

When thinking about culture it is also helpful to recognize that cultural assumptions, values and beliefs can change over time. The attitude of middle-class English towards the

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female body is a cultural value that has changed over time. Figure 1 is a picture of a device called a bathing machine that was used until the early part of the last century.

![Figure 1 – A Victorian bathing machine](image)

To avoid being seen while swimming, a proper Victorian woman would change into her swimming suit in the cabin, then have the device backed into the water and after the tent was lowered she would down the steps into the water – all to avoid being seen in a garb not unlike those in Figure 2. Contrast that with the picture in Figure 3 taken on an Atlantic beach. The difference between the two behaviors and the clothing worn is significant.

![Figure 2 - Victorian bathing suits](image)

![Figure 3 – On an Atlantic Beach in 2005](image)
This difference does demonstrate that cultural values and behaviors can change over time. What is also interesting with this example is that many modern British women believe that Arab customs concerning concealing the female form are unreasonable. A culture no longer holds a value and is even critical of other cultures that have that value.

When thinking about cultural assumptions, values and beliefs it is also valuable to keep in mind that within a culture there are variations. For example, in Sweden it is not unusual for young people to dress differently than older adults. This can be described as variations within a single culture. The bell curve shown in Figure 4 is used to show how normal variations within a population are distributed – in this case, a cultural value held by a population. If we were to say that the bell curve in Figure 4 shows the distribution of the kinds of clothing being worn then we might put traditional dress on one side, clothing worn by youth at the other and clothing worn for everyday activities (the majority) in the middle.

![Figure 4](image)

**Figure 4 – Distribution within a population as shown by a bell curve. Clothing as a cultural value is used to show how a culture can have a range of values with clothing worn by few people at the ends and clothing worn by the majority of people most of the time in the middle.**

It is also helpful to keep in mind that there are primary cultures and sub-cultures by geographic region. In other words, people living in the same area have the same general culture. The further one moves from a place the more there are differences.

So far we’ve defined culture, recognized that it changes and that within a culture there are variations. These are all elements that we knew already; however, it helps to state the obvious as a way to develop a common perspective.

Equally important is that talking about these factors helps a person to be aware of their own culture. Through simple examples we can think of other cultural rules that we follow – we are sensitized to the concept of culture.

Understanding our own culture can help us in understanding and interacting with persons from other cultures. When we have contact with persons from a different culture we can
remember that what we think about a particular topic and what they think about the same topic can be completely different.

So, we can say that an awareness of one’s own culture is a first step in learning to interact with other cultures; by recognizing that we are governed by unwritten rules helps us to realize that those from other cultures are equally driven. Here in Sweden when we have contact with someone from another culture we can use our awareness to bridge differences in understanding.

According to data available from Statistiska centralbyrån approximately one in every five persons living in Sweden were either born in another country or have parents who were born in another country. From a practical standpoint this means that it is likely that a native Swede will have some form of regular contact with those who are influenced by the assumptions, values and beliefs of a different culture. Educators, with very few exceptions, have daily contact with those from other cultures.

As noted earlier, young persons are usually able to more easily learn a second culture. For that matter, those who are exposed to two or more cultures from birth are often able to switch from one set of cultural rules to another without difficulty. How successfully they function may be influenced by factors such as how well they are accepted by the culture they are living in, social standing and similarities between the two cultures (e.g. in Sweden a Norwegian youth whose parents are physicians is likely experience less difficulty than an African youth whose parents are not working). It is difficult to generalize more about this group as the nature and number of factors that can possibly influence their thinking is many.

As also mentioned previously, those who come to a second culture after living in and learning one culture may or may not be able to function successfully in the second culture. Reasons for success or failure are similar to those experienced by persons born into two cultures. However, this group is less likely to have as complete an understanding of the second culture’s assumptions, values and beliefs. They are more likely to find themselves in situations where they unknowingly violate an unwritten cultural rule – they usually are not told what they’ve done wrong; instead they get some sort of discouraging response. They sense they’ve done something wrong but have no insight into what it was; a discouraging dilemma. Sometimes cultural rules can even end up being a form of discrimination – a rule is violated, they are discouraged and end up unsuccessful; which, in a sense, is not unlike being denied something because of an obvious difference such as skin color.

Besides being aware that our actions can be dictated by the cultural rules we follow, what strategies can we use when wanting to communicate effectively with someone from another culture? What are we already doing?

There are a number of intercultural communication methods being used that you can read about (a list of some follows this paper). Most emphasize the need to be aware of one’s own culture and how it might drive decisions or actions; as discussed above.
Another important strategy is the value of observation. No always reacting/responding immediately can bring more information; a greater context (about context later). Through listening to someone from another culture we pick up clues that can tell us about their cultural assumptions, values and beliefs. That doesn’t mean we should be inscrutable (outgrundlig) or silent.

**Some Additional Intercultural Communication Tools**
Over the past 50 years cultural studies have evolved from a branch of anthropology to a specialization of popular interest. More people from more cultures are moving throughout the world. For a variety of reasons, good and bad, it is less risky to change one’s country than ever before. Also, travel today is usually faster and cheaper than it has ever been before. One is just as likely to encounter a culture from half way around the world as one from a neighboring country. More people want to know about intercultural contact and communication; more than lists of correct behavior. Since the ‘50s a number of persons have written about culture. Some of the writing describes the influence of culture on information/communication, time and space. This material can be useful to think about when working to communicate with someone from another cultural background; an addition to the framework you’re already using.

**Information/Communication, Time and Space**
Information/communication concerns how people exchange and structure contact – different cultures want different kinds of information, in differing quantities and differing order. Time is about how people use and understand time – some cultures structure how time is used and measured differently. People use space differently – the suitable distance between two people when standing and talking can be very different between two cultures.

**Information/Communication**
Cultures have differing combinations of “fast” to “slow” communication styles where understanding can be quick to quite slow (e.g. a newspaper headline and a cartoon are fast and a book and a work of art are slow). Other examples of fast and slow are in Figure 5. A fast culture can be out of synchronization with a slow culture; the two have difficulty communicating about something. Listening to someone from another culture means trying to determine how fast or slow a person is – then, if necessary, adjust speed. It is difficult to describe fast and slow as the words have multiple meanings. Perhaps what is critical is to not label something as fast when it isn’t. For example, Americans are often considered fast by persons from other cultures because Americans talk informally and use first names not long after meeting people. This behavior has also been described a superficial. These conclusions are not necessarily correct; Americans define friendship differently.
Fast | Slow
---|---
• Prose | • Poetry
• Headlines | • Books
• A communiqué | • An ambassador
• Propaganda | • Art
• Cartoons | • Etchings
• TV commercials | • TV documentary
• Television | • Print
• Easy familiarity | • Deep relationships
• Manners | • Culture
• Lust | • Love
• Temporary Marriage | • Marriage

Figure 5 – Examples of fast and slow messages

High and Low Context Information
How much information people need in a message can vary between cultures. Some cultures share information constantly and others compartmentalize information. For example, in Asia information is constantly being exchanged – people know what is going on around them and a conversation can be very short. Northern Europeans are more compartmentalized and therefore will want more information during a conversation. Figure 6 illustrates low and high context messaging.

Figure 6 – High and low context communication. The lower left corner of the square represents what is transmitted during communication while the upper right corner represents what is already known.

Someone who is operating at a high context level already has most of the information needed to understand a message while someone at the low context level requires detail in a message. People who belong to more high context cultures expect little information in a message and those who belong to low context cultures expect more information in a message. For example, a Japanese student (high context) seldom needs to be told the
format to use for homework while an American student expects to be told how to organize their work.

People who are high context may become impatient and irritated when low-context people insist on giving them information they feel they don’t need. At the opposite, low context people become lost when high context people don’t give them enough information. The challenge is to find the appropriate level of contexting to use in each situation. Too much information can make others feel that they are being talked down to while too little information can mystify or make them feel left out. In their own country people make these adjustments automatically as they know how much is necessary without thinking – in other countries their messages may “miss the target”.

A paradox to this is that high context people often want a lot of information when it is about something they know little or nothing about. For example, Chinese, who are usually high context, want a lot of detail when being helped with their English. They want to know the rules that are being followed and will generally want a detailed description. This is the opposite of when it is a topic they know and understand.

Logic
Here in the West we are taught to present arguments and description in a linear fashion. Some variation of the following chain is used in school, businesses and government activities:

- Background
- Problem
- Hypothesis
- Means of testing
- Evidence
- Arguments as to what the evidence means
- Refutation of possible counterarguments and
- Conclusions and recommendations

This approach comes from the Greek philosophers and is followed in the European and Arab worlds where the Greeks influenced the development of reasoning and science. Emphasis is on the form rather than the content. In contrast, Asian thinking is more concerned with the information and to a westerner a presentation may seem rambling and unfocused. With the Asian approach the listener is expected to organize according to what they perceive; what might be described as circular rather than linear.

In education this can mean that students from cultures that use a different method of reasoning may seem to be intellectually impaired when they first begin to use the linear Western method of reasoning. This author recalls studying in an international program where students from all over the world were expected to work in cooperative groups to prepare studies and reports. Initially students had difficulty communicating and were suspicious of each other – because each had different ways of problem solving. In time,
all students learned to use the Western approach (the program was oriented towards using the Western method) when working together.

**Action Chains**

An action chain is an established sequence of events between people that is used to reach a goal. Building a love relationship between a woman and a man (courtship) is an example of an action chain; it has time-honored stages – if either party rushes, omits a step or delays too long between steps then the relationship does not work. Different cultures have their own rules for action chains. High context cultures often manage action chains differently than do low context cultures. In education, learning can be described as using action chains where knowledge development is a series of steps used to help students gain knowledge. Students from different cultures may be accustomed to using different types of learning action chains than is in use in the school where they are studying. The student may appear to be uncooperative when in reality they are accustomed to using a different action chain.

**Time**

One of the most important cultural differences concerning time is how it is managed and arranged. There are two basic types: monochronic and polychronic. Among different cultures this time difference can vary and be interpreted differently depending upon what is taking place at the moment. Monochronic time is time spent doing one thing at a time. Polychronic time is time spent doing many things at once. Within education it may seem a teacher’s focus is monochronic – studying a particular lesson while the students’ focus is polychronic – sending SMS messages and other social exchanges while listening to a lesson. The example of teacher and student differences between time for lessons gives a basic idea of the difference between the two time systems. On a broader, cultural level the list in Figure 7 describes the contrast between the two in a range of contexts. When reviewing the list it is important to remember that it does not apply equally to all cultures; rather the list attempts to show a pattern between the two.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Monochronic People</strong></th>
<th><strong>Polychronic People</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>do one thing at a time</td>
<td>do many things at once</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>concentrate on the job</td>
<td>are highly distractible and subject to interruptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>take time commitments seriously (e.g. deadlines &amp; schedules)</td>
<td>consider time commitments an objective to be achieved, if possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are low context and need information</td>
<td>are high context and already have information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are committed to the job</td>
<td>are committed to people and human relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adhere religiously to plans</td>
<td>change plans often and easily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are concerned about not disturbing others; use rules of privacy and consideration</td>
<td>are more concerned with those who are closely related (family &amp; friends) than with privacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>show great respect for private property; seldom borrow or lend</td>
<td>borrow and lend things often and easily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emphasize promptness</td>
<td>base promptness on the relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>have more short-term relationships</td>
<td>have a strong tendency to build lifetime relationships</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Monochronic cultures use and experience time in a linear way – like a road going from the past to the future. Monochronic time is divided into segments that are scheduled and compartmentalized. This makes it possible for someone using monochronic time to focus on one thing at a time. The schedule can take priority over all else and be treated as unalterable. Users perceive time as almost tangible – it is described as something that can be “spent”, “wasted”, “saved” or “lost”. It is also a system for ordering life and setting priorities – “I don’t have time to see him”. Time becomes a room which some are allowed to enter and others are excluded.

In almost every respect polychronic time is the opposite. It is characterized by many things happening at one time and by an emphasis on involvement with people. There is more of an emphasis on completing a human transaction than there is on following a schedule.

Northern Europeans are more monochronic in their use of time and Southern Europeans are more polychronic. This difference can create misunderstandings and failed action chains because of the differing approaches to time. Within education it can mean that a student who comes from a culture that is mainly polychronic may be seen as “unreliable” and “disorganized” because of their style of using time.

Space
Everyone has a physical boundary - skin – that separate them from the external environment. This physical boundary is surrounded by a series of invisible boundaries that are difficult to define – but they are just as real. Two important invisible boundaries are personal space and territoriality.

Each person has a personal space around themselves which expands and contracts – according to factors such as emotional state, cultural background and the activity being performed. Few people are allowed to penetrate this boundary – and usually only for short periods of time. For intercultural communication this means that someone from one culture may have a smaller boundary than someone from another culture. One penetrates the boundary without even realizing it. During a conversation, try standing closer to someone than is normal. The other person will move away if their personal space is penetrated. Without their realizing what is occurring, it’s possible to move someone around a room by penetrating their personal space. Some negotiators use this to create a tension and discomfort which gives an advantage.

Territoriality is more general and concerns what and how much another feels they “own” something. The what and how much of territoriality is influenced by culture. Use of space is a form or territoriality – in some cultures a room may be labeled as private where in others the concept of a separate private space or room is unthinkable. Touching something that another considers their own may be seen as an invasion of territory.
Within education, this cultural influence upon the perception of space can create misunderstanding and block learning because of a preoccupation with the difference. For several months I worked for a program that taught immigrants Swedish. Each student had to be treated differently. How each handled space was important. As a man, it was not appropriate to move too close when helping women from some cultures. Touching was almost unthinkable and it was apparent that a student stopping thinking about what they were learning when they felt that their personal space was being too closely intruded upon. Territoriality can influence learning when someone feels that their territory is being intruded upon. Cooperative projects are an example. In projects I’ve worked upon with persons from another culture it became apparent to me that persons from some cultures felt that they must “own” a part of a project while others were happy to have their contributions merge into the whole project.

Information/communication, time and space can interact together to make up a mix that is used by a particular culture. For example, in some cultures where a constant flow of information is viewed as important space is used differently. In business where a culture is monochronic there is also a tendency to restrict the flow of information and to create space where intrusion is heavily controlled. A polychronic culture tends to prefer constant flows of information and to use space to create an environment where movement of people and information is constant. Compare a typical office in Germany with a typical office in France. In Germany rooms are used, time is linear and information flow is controlled along strict lines. In France there are more open spaces where managers and subordinates are together, time is more polychronic and the flow of information appears to be unstructured.

**Closing Thoughts**

Awareness of one’s own culture and awareness that culture affects how communication is interpreted are obvious starting points when wanting to effectively exchange ideas with those from other cultures. When we listen we are keeping ourselves open to the ideas of others and we can be more able to ignore our own cultural biases that might block exchange of messages. While this strategy helps us it does not address the perceptions, understanding and thinking of the other person.

Awareness of factors such as how another perceives information/communication, time and space can help us to begin to “connect” with someone from another culture. Having an idea that another may think and define differently will help us to begin to identify the other’s way of thinking about the world. We can start to attempt to “release” responses that build rather than block communication and understanding.

Important when seeking to release responses that foster communication is to remember that each culture is a unique combination of assumptions, values, beliefs. Concepts of information/communication, time and space are blended together in different ways for different cultures. Too, the context or circumstances affect responses. It’s a bit like trying to read a map while also trying to learn the meanings of all the map’s symbols.

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Suggested Reading


