A SELF-REPORTING INSTRUMENT FOR GAUGING AND IMPROVING CROSS-CULTURAL AWARENESS IN THE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

This article describes a process whereby faculty can self-assess their cross-cultural sensitivity as it relates to promoting a positive learning environment in our multicultural classrooms. This self-assessment measure encourages personal reflection and is intended to perpetuate professional growth that can use self-understanding as a foundation for improved teaching techniques.

AUTHOR BIO

Jim Schnell, Ph.D. (1982, Ohio University) is a Professor of Communication Studies at Ohio Dominican University where he has earned Master Teacher status. He has taught the basic communication course for over 26 years and has authored six books, over 60 book chapters & journal articles and over 130 conference presentations. Schnell is a 2005-2006 Fulbright Scholar to Cambodia (Royal University of Phnom Penh) and his teaching career has included positions at Ohio University, Miami University, University of Cincinnati and Northern Jiaotong University (Beijing, China). He holds the rank of Colonel in the U.S. Air Force (reserve) where he serves as a cultural analyst.

"Today we are faced with the preeminent fact that, if civilization is to survive, we must cultivate the science of human relationships—the ability of all peoples, of all kinds, to live together and work together, in the same world, at peace."

<div align="right">Franklin D. Roosevelt
April 13, 1945</div>

The typical American classroom in higher education has changed significantly over the past thirty years. Increased world trade has brought an influx of international students to study at American colleges and universities. The civil rights movement and educational reform in the United States have drastically increased the number of American minority students who have gone on to college. Both situations have caused a need for greater sensitivity of cross-cultural concerns in the multicultural classroom. The former situation emphasizing cultural differences and the latter situation emphasizing sub-cultural differences.

The primary objective of this article is to help faculty evaluate their cross-cultural awareness to provide a starting point for improvement in this area (but not necessarily indicate "right/wrong" approaches). This end is stressed through the use of a self-reporting instrument that faculty can use to gauge their awareness of primary areas of cross-cultural difference in the classroom.

"Demographic changes are transforming the United States into a microcosm of the global village. Immigration has made North American society increasingly multicultural and multiethnic" (Adler, 2007, p. 30). This reflects significantly more emphasis on the concept of diversity. "Cultural differences represent a major form of diversity in a group. Groups of the future will continue to be increasingly more diverse, so information about how cultures differ can help you be a more effective group member" (Adams, 2006, p.

196). These changes will not happen overnight but, instead, will unfold consistently over time.

"Unless someone calls attention to a feature of our culture, we don't think too much about the significant role it plays in shaping our behavior. In addition, we tend to assume that individuals from other cultures share our values, behaviors, and communication patterns, but they don't" (Adams, 2006, p. 197). These unique features can be found in varied areas of our daily lives. "Trends in many areas go together to make up the climate of the times . . . four such areas include: 1) patterns of work; 2) relationship styles; 3) attitudes toward self-fulfillment; and 4) messages from the mass media" (Knapp, 2005, p. 104). Changes in our cultural climate can change much like the changes we experience in the meteorological climate.

"People in most, if not all, cultures have a notion about the self, although specific notions of self vary across cultures. These variations or cultural differences influence person-to-person interactions in sometimes subtle and sometimes dramatic ways, affecting how we conceive of 'self,' the expectations we have for ourselves and others and our behavior" (Gamble, 2005, p. 52). Although there is significant potential for differences to serve as possible obstacles to interpersonal relations in the basic communication course classroom it is reassuring to recognize the primary role of individual orientations. "Even when people with different cultural backgrounds communicate, shared values and experiences are often more significant than the cultural backgrounds they bring to the relationship" (Adler, 2007, p. 32).

Thus, we can recognize the important role good intentions can play in the communication process. "To a great degree, interacting with strangers (those who are

culturally different than yourself) calls for the same ingredients of general communicative competence . . . . It's important to have a wide range of behaviors and to be skillful at choosing and performing the most appropriate ones in a given situation. A genuine concern for others plays an important role" (Adler, 2007, p. 47). It is in that spirit that the perspective of this chapter is conveyed.

The survey that follows is entitled "Cultural Bound Areas for Personal Reflection." These culture bound areas are areas that can be interpreted and emphasized in significantly different ways depending upon an individual's cultural background. The survey is based on an outline of culture bound areas that was created by the National Association for Developmental Education.

SA-Strongly agree
A-agree
N-neutral
D-disagree
SD-strongly disagree

CULTURAL BOUND AREAS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION:

I. EXPECTATIONS AND STANDARDS	**SA**	**A**	**N**	**D**	**SD**
A. Teacher-student communication should be based on formal (rather than informal) interaction.	5	4	3	2	1
B. Dress and cleanliness is important.	5	4	3	2	1
C. If a student is academically unprepared, it is primarily his or her own fault.	5	4	3	2	1
D. Students should have a lot of free time.	5	4	3	2	1
E. Respect for authority is important.	5	4	3	2	1
F. If a student is caught in an academically dishonest action, he or she should be expelled from school.	5	4	3	2	1

II. APPROACHES   SA A N D SD

A. I handle emotionally charged issues and   5   4   3   2   1
   conflict by never losing control of myself
   or my control over the classroom.

B. Humor is essential in the classroom.   5   4   3   2   1

C. I enjoy some students less than others.   5   4   3   2   1

III. PREFERENCES   SA A N D SD

A. It is important for me to treat students the   5   4   3   2   1
   same. They should never know if I really
   like them individually or not.

B. I prefer group (instead of individual) learning   5   4   3   2   1
   activities.

C. I prefer docile (instead of aggressive) students. 5   4   3   2   1

This questionnaire is intended for use by the individual. The respondent indicates his or her response in each of the areas: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree. These are areas where the cultural background of each individual will impact his or her perception regarding the perspective to be maintained.

When used in a workshop setting, this survey can help participants gauge their cross-cultural sensitivity by comparing/contrasting their perceptions with others. This instrument focuses on teacher expectations, standards, personal perspectives, approaches in common situations, and how these areas can benefit or detract from the classroom environment. Use of the instrument can be prefaced with a description of theoretical concerns that underscore the relevance of areas to be reviewed. Primary benefits from this experience can be realized through discussion of how participants can use the self-assessment results to improve their teaching approaches based on increased awareness of varying cross-cultural perspectives that frequently exist in the multicultural classroom.

These are areas that are commonly misunderstood among faculty members and international students. Thus the survey can benefit users via enhanced awareness of these potential areas of misunderstanding. For instance, I.F. states "If a student is caught in an academically dishonest action, he or she should be expelled from school." This can be problematic because what is academically dishonest in one culture may not be perceived the same way in another culture.

For instance, plagiarism in the American culture is a serious offense that can result in expulsion from school. Plagiarism in China, in general terms, is more commonly practiced since "no one owns an idea as their very own." Thus, books are more frequently copied from since "ideas belong to the masses." At first glance this would seem unethical but a closer look reveals it is not the case. The Chinese author is not necessarily claiming ideas that are not footnoted as his or her own. Nor would he or she be too concerned if his or her ideas were conveyed without footnote. Ideas are phenomena that more freely belong to all in China. In the United States we tend to see ideas more as something to be owned.

Sensitivity with these areas is helpful when interacting with the many subcultures that exist in the United States. The misunderstandings that occur among international cultures parallel the misunderstandings that exist among American subcultures. The differing frames of reference are a key variable in such interactions. These varied frames of reference reveal varied interpretations on a single continuum rather than opposite perceptions of the culture bound areas. The key here is that the degrees of difference depend on the cultural backgrounds that are compared.

How we teach our classes can almost be equally as important as what we are teaching. That is, actions speak louder than words. Thus, a multicultural classroom environment that is sensitive to various cultural and sub-cultural backgrounds is going to help provide considerable understanding for students of all backgrounds. Obviously the faculty member has a direct influence on this classroom environment.

Culture is the backdrop within which teaching and learning takes place. We all use our cultural background to "filter" what we are perceiving in the classroom. Thus, the American faculty member can actually experience "culture shock" in his or her own classroom without leaving the country.

Culture shock occurs when we experience confusion, anger, or despair as a result of unsuccessful attempts to make sense of cultural practices which are foreign to us (Schnell, 1996, p. 150). This usually occurs when we are outside of our own culture (in another country) but it can happen when dealing with culturally different individuals in our own culture. Culture shock usually involves four stages: the honeymoon, crisis, recovery, and adjustment stages (Oberg, 1985, pp. 170-179).

The honeymoon stage occurs during our initial interactions with a new culture when we are intrigued with new places and new ways of living. The crisis stage occurs when we encounter a situation that we do not know how to resolve and we become frustrated. The recovery stage occurs when we learn how to resolve the situation. The adjustment stage occurs after we have resolved the conflict and begin to enjoy the culture again (Schnell, 1996, pp. 150-151).

The aforementioned situation involving differing views on academic dishonesty (between the United States and China) exemplifies a culture shock situation I experienced

while teaching in China. First, I enjoyed learning new things about the Chinese culture (honeymoon). Second, I observed students plagiarizing from outside sources when writing their papers (crisis). Third, I found plagiarism is a more common practice in Chinese universities (recovery). Fourth, I told my students this was against the way I had been trained in the United States but that I would adopt the Chinese approach on the issue since I was in China (adjustment).

I have experienced paralleled situations in the United States when working with culturally different students. The following four steps describe such a case. First, I had two Vietnamese students who were new to the United States. I was interested in getting to know them as I am interested in Vietnamese history and they were "boat people" who had escaped from Vietnam (honeymoon). Second, their understanding of American culture was minimal and they had great difficulty understanding various assignments in the classroom (crisis). Third, I modified their assignments, basing them on universal understandings, so the Vietnamese students could complete the course objectives (recovery). Fourth, the students and I achieved an academic basis for common understanding (adjustment).

There are many rules of interpersonal interaction to acknowledge when considering cross-cultural communication. One such model involves high-context communication processes and low-context communication processes. In high-context cultures speakers present messages indirectly and let meanings evolve. Much is communicated through paralanguage cues and gesturing. High-context cultures are located mainly in the Orient (Hecht, 1989).

Speakers in low-context cultures are more direct when presenting messages. Low-context cultures are found mainly in the United States and European countries. Awareness of these perspectives is based heavily on both verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Obviously there is much room for confusion and incorrect interpretation of intentions.

Different perceptions of the culture bound areas are not always a matter of differing values. Values can be similar but the *expression* of these values based on cultural communicative norms can vary significantly. Cross-cultural understanding can become especially difficult because different perceptions of culture bound areas can be a matter of differing values and differing communication processes. Thus, a high degree of tolerance is beneficial.

It is a myth to believe it is enough to treat culturally (or sub-culturally) different students like they are from your own culture (or subculture). Such a view is too ethnocentric. A basic goal can be to create a classroom environment that meets culturally different students "halfway." Intentions to establish a clear understanding can serve as a base for clear understanding. The following recommendations, general and specific, can help enhance such intentions.

Generally speaking, awareness of the affective, cognitive, and interpersonal domains of cross-cultural interaction can provide a general basis for improved relations. The affective domain involves acceptance and respect of other cultural backgrounds. The cognitive domain emphasizes knowledge and understanding of other cultural backgrounds. The interpersonal domain stresses the development of communication skills for interacting with various cultural backgrounds.

A specific approach starts with faculty members tape recording their lectures for personal review. Particular areas for evaluation include the use of sarcasm, language norms, vocal animation, supporting statements through repetition and substantiation, level of vocabulary, pronunciation and articulation, and rate of speech. All of these areas can be variables in cross-cultural interaction.

Specific analysis of the following survey areas can also be beneficial:

I.   A. Teacher-student communication should be based on formal (rather than informal) interaction.

II. A. I handle emotionally charged issues and conflict by never losing control of myself or my control over the classroom.

II. B. Humor is essential in the classroom.

III.A. It is important for me to treat students the same. They should never know if I really like them individually or not.

These areas can be evaluated using taped lectures. Again, it is important to realize these areas can vary from culture to culture. In doing this type of evaluation one should consider how his or her approach fits within his or her own culture/subculture and how his or her approach could possibly conflict with other cultural/sub-cultural approaches.

The need for cross-cultural sensitivity in the classroom is a need that will doubtfully ever be fully met. But evaluation of faculty awareness in this area is the first step towards gauging our weaknesses (and strengths) regarding how we can promote a better understanding of not just what we teach but how we teach it.

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