Introduction to Intercultural Communication

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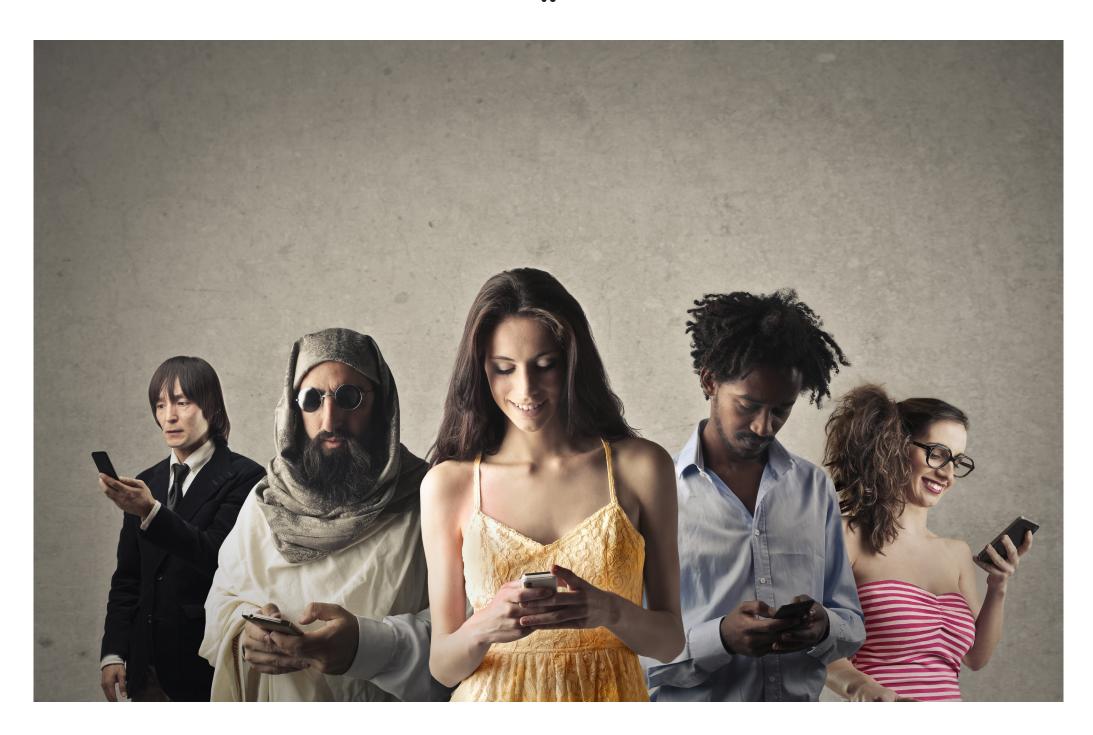# Introduction to Intercultural Communication

Introduction

I don't much like him. I think I need to get to know him better.
Abraham Lincoln

The curse of the human race is not that we are so different from one another, but that we are so alike.
Salman Rushdie, *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008)

Intercultural competence and one of the primary vehicles to achieve it—intercultural communication—are no longer just desired additional qualifications; they are an inevitable necessity. Facilitated by near instantaneous digital communication, transnational media dispersal and consumption, and readily accessible global travel, the globalized market place dictates that contacts and exchanges with different cultural communities—their languages, their world-views, their mores, etc.—have become the norm in the everyday lives of people all over the world. Consequently, this primer and the project it is a constituent part of take their cue from

communication scholars Edwin McDaniel Larry Samovar, and Richard Porter, who have argued that "[t]he ability to work effectively with people from other nations and ethnicities, speaking different languages and possessing varied values and beliefs, will become [addendum: is] a common requirement" (2011, 6). While such a proclamation is neither new nor innovative, especially in the context of international business communication (e.g., Hofstede 1980; 1991), there is a degree of urgency—supercharged by the boom in entrepreneurship as the principle mode for thinking and creating human realities in the twenty-first century—for acquiring the necessary skills to practice intercultural competence.

While the principle goal of this primer is to serve as an entry point for initiating meaningful dialog between different cultural groups, it makes sense to briefly introduce the basic definitions, key tenets, and reasoning that inform both its intended application and goal. Chief among them are the two principle elements that constitute intercultural communication—culture and communication.

Culture may be understood as a totality of anthropogenic codes that we use to give meaning to, and make sense of, our lived experience (past, present, and future), and define ourselves and each other within said experience. In other words, culture is the "lens through which life is perceived. Through its differences (in language, values, personality and family patterns, worldview, sense of time and space, and rules of interaction), each culture generates a different experience of reality" (Moule 2011, 11). Culture is thus learned, transmitted generationally, symbolic, dynamic, and ethnocentric (McDaniel, Samovar, and Porter 2011, 12–3). Imagining culture as an iceberg is a common analogy to distinguish between surface elements of culture (e.g., forms of dress, holidays, rituals, and narratives) and deep culture such as unspoken rules (e.g., forms of courtesy, body language, and eye contact) and unconscious rules (e.g., concepts of time, kinship, and the "self") (Moule 2011, 91).

Communication is an integral part of culture because it serves to create, share, and receive meaning. Communication is marked by "intentionality and interaction" (McDaniel, Samovar, and Porter 2011, 9). Consequently, when we communicate interculturally, we are tasked with engaging in a challenging process of multi-directional and multi-tiered translation and conversion. In other words, intercultural communication should not be misconceived as a quick-fix product or outcome of a single exercise, but rather as a "developmental process that depends on the continual acquisition of knowledge, the development of new and more advanced skills, and ongoing reflective self-evaluation of progress" (Moule 2011, 13). No matter how small the step, this process starts somewhere.

Since "cultures can only be understood relative to one another" (Bennett 1993, 26), this primer is designed to be deployed as a first-stage activity to facilitate intercultural communication between diverse cultural groups, provided that they agree on using one common language during the exercises.

Having acknowledged that, the primer's main target audience is comprised of two cultural groups of loose homogeneity—American and Austrian/Styrian students participating in the Transatlantic Entrepreneurship Academy. On the surface, these two students groups seem to share a host of similarities, as they originate in the Global North. However, upon closer look, these groups are very different from one another. Michael Hinner's critical insights on the challenges of intercultural (mis)communication in business between the United States and Germany serve as pertinent correlative, as he has argued that "[m]ost people do not consider culture to be an issue if the participants appear to fairly similar to one another," often eschewing, he continues, "social organization and interaction (sociofacts), and cognitive patterns, (mentifacts), which are not always readily apparent to the observer but are express by the actions and behavior of people as well as in the thinking and decision-making process" (2011, 340).

Consequently, the exercises in our primer build on a simple and shared conceptual category which serves to puncture surface culture in order to efficiently establish intercultural rapport and subsequent entrepreneurial collaboration.

In the vein of renowned linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, Mary Fong reminds us that "[a]chieving understanding across languages is dependent on common conceptual systems rather than structural equivalences" (2011, 274). Since cultures rely on symbols and their attendant meanings, we opted for constructing exercises linked by an unambiguous common conceptual system—animals—which, we are certain, will yield the desired results.

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Establishing Intercultural Dialog

Note

This series of activities is designed for participants in the Transatlantic Entrepreneurship Academy (undergradutate students from the University of Graz, Austria, and Montclair State University, New Jersey, USA). Expected group size: 20 American and 20 Austrian students.

Seating Arrangement in the Beginning

Students are asked to sit alternatingly based on their home university (i.e., one student from Montclair, one student from Graz, another student from Montclair, etc.).

Round #1: Flash Round (Plenary)

At the beginning of the day, each participant is asked to **think about an animal they identify with** and **formulate at least two reasons as to why they chose** that particular animal. This will be their "personal animal" for the remainder of the morning.

Afterwards, everyone tells the group which animal they chose (but not the reasons for selecting it). In addition to opening a dialog between participants, the exercise is also designed as a means to aid the remembering of other participants' names with the help of their chosen animal.

Round #2: Market Place (Plenary)

Five stations are set up at comfortable distances in the room. All of these stations feature the name of an animal on flip chart/poster paper, leaving room for additional remarks. All participants write **characteristics of, and/or associations they have with**, each animal on the paper of the respective station, which leads to individual brainstorming of characteristics. Color-coded pens (blue = US, red = AUT) serve to identify the culture-specific associations with each animal.

Possible pool of animals:

eagle	snake	mosquito
cow*	rat	horse*
lion	pigeon	crow/raven
bear	ant	shark
wolf	bee	rabbit

*) likely to produce culturally specific connotations

The goal of the exercise is to distil (a) **cultural differences** and (b) **cultural commonalities** based on the characteristics the participants have associated with each animal and consolidated with the help of the moderator.

Round #3: Specifying and Generalizing the Personal Animals (Group Work)

After having established the potential cultural differences that participants have displayed, the personal animals are discussed and **individuals share their associations with their chosen animals**. This task is designed to break the ice between participants and **create a more personal connection**. In addition, students will think about the interrelations between individuals and the cultures surrounding them.

Ten groups are formed, **featuring two Austrians and two Americans each**. Ideally, the groups should have a variety of animals to facilitate a more engaging discussion. Alternatingly, **each individual restates their personal animal** and the **three remaining members of the group share their associations with the animal**. The individual whose personal animal has been discussed, in turn, **tells the rest of the group their reason(s)** for choosing that animal. In a final step, the entire group reflects on their associations. This task engages everyone in a discussion about the respective animals and individual as well as cultural associations with these symbols.

BREAK

Round #4: Playing ZOO TYCOON (Groups + Plenary)

In a second round of group work, the groups formed in round #3 are asked to **apply their business knowledge** in an entertaining and interactive way. After the preceding task, the individual group members should have gotten to know each other a little. This exercise will take them to the next step and into a more business-oriented mindset.

The groups are tasked with either of the following thought experiments (students might be offered both variants or the moderator may choose one for all groups):

VARIANT A

Start a successful zoo with your animal team, with the personal animals both representing actual animals that would be on display in the zoo and the animals' characteristics standing in for the zoo management's characteristics. Come up with a **concept, location, and name** for the zoo, supposing you have seemingly limitless funds available when setting up the zoo. What else do you need to be successful? Do you need additional animals? (Wo)Manpower? Is any quality missing in management? Present a short **elevator pitch of concept and "needs" to plenary**.

VARIANT B

Start a zoo (or a similar entertainment/recreational venue) with your four animals + one additional "joker" animal which group members are allowed to choose freely. How would you turn the likely eclectic mix of creatures into **a successful, fun, money-making attraction**, if you had practically unlimited funds at your disposal? Present a short **elevator pitch of concept to plenary**.

THAT'S A WRAP!

Muddiest Point (BOTH in US and in AUT)

In order to evaluate challenges of intercultural contact the participants encountered during the workshop and in order to facilitate a more open and intercultural exchange, the following activity should give an insight into what parts of the program/exercise worked for the participants and which ones they would like to see amended in future workshops. The task can be done anonymously, but for more targeted feedback the blue and red color-coding (blue = US, red= AUT) mentioned above should be maintained.

This particular exercise is designed not only to guarantee feedback for the workshop conductors, but also to help the participants reflect on their experiences during the workshop. At the end of both of their stays in the United States and Austria, participants are asked to answer the following questions:

(a) What was the most confusing, surprising, provocative, revelatory, disturbing, etc. experience or moment when interacting with the other culture? (Note: This experience/moment may have occurred outside the workshop.)
(b) What was the most confusing, surprising, provocative, revelatory, disturbing, etc. experience or moment in the foreign environment?
(c) What was the most challenging, frustrating, confusing, uncomfortable, disorienting, unclear for myself?

Illustrations

Das Land Steiermark

Wissenschaft und Forschung

CiAS

Center for Inter-American Studies

UNI GRAZ