Communicating Across Cultures

Overview

1. Importance of cross-cultural competence
2. What is culture?
3. Cultural self-assessment
4. How do cultures vary?
5. How to deal with stereotypes
6. Basics of communication
7. Improving Intercultural Communication
8. A case study of German-American workgroups
1. Culture has a strong impact on your communication behavior

2. Different cultures have different modes, codes, and values defining how people communicate (verbal and non-verbal)

3. When people from different cultures communicate with each other, difficulties and miscommunication can occur

4. What can we do about this…….? 
Intercultural Contact

- **International**: between people from different cultures and cultures
  - New technology and information systems
  - Changes in the world’s population
  - Rapid movement towards a global economy

- **Domestic interaction**: with members of other co-cultures
  - Dominant culture, “mainstream culture,”
  - Co-cultures: share many features of dominant culture, but have also distinctly different patterns and perceptions (African-Americans, gays, the military…)
What is Culture?

“Or: “The way we do things around here”

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“A relatively organized set of beliefs and expectations about how people should talk, think, and organize their lives.” (Bate)
What is Culture? The Iceberg analogy: Most of culture is invisible and taken for granted

Concrete expressions: dress code, architecture, food, language, transportation, political system, legal system
“Culture with a big C”: language, art, music

Artifacts: working hours, business meetings, social events, rituals, jargon etc. = structures and processes

Visible

Explicit beliefs and Values

Invisible

Assumptions, expectations, opinions, norms, values, belief systems

Underlying assumptions: unconscious, perceptions, thoughts, feelings
Work in pairs: Discuss with your partner the following questions:

- Name three cultural norms or values that were important in your upbringing.

- How important is it to be punctual in the culture you come from?

- Is it seen as impolite in your culture to interrupt others during conversation?
Dimensions of cultures: How do cultures vary?

- Hofstede’s five value dimensions:
  - Power distance
    - the extent to which the less powerful person in society considers inequality in power as normal
  - Uncertainty avoidance
    - toleration of uncertainty and ambiguity or strict codes of behavior and absolute truth
  - Individualism/collectivism
    - self-orientation versus collective orientation
  - Masculinity/femininity
    - degree to which masculine or feminine traits are valued
  - Long-term/short-term orientation
    - favoring long-term or short-term planning
High Context/Low Context Dimension (Hall)

High Context Cultures:
- Many of the meanings being exchanged during encounter are not communicated through words (Latin America, Japan, Arab countries, China)

Low-Context Cultures:
- Less homogeneous populations, verbal message contains most of the information, little in context of participants (Germany, Swiss, Scandinavia, North America)
Stereotypes and necessary generalizations

From: Bennett, “Intercultural Communication.”
Communication

- Every act of communication has always two levels
  - content level (you convey information)
  - relationship level (you establish a relationship)

- If the two don’t go together, communication may not succeed
Non-Verbal Communication: Typology and Dimensions

Proxemics: the use of personal space (private space, public space, queuing)

Intimate (touching to 18 inches), private situations, whisper
Personal (18 inches to 4 feet), couples in public, soft voice
Casual (4 to 12 feet), working together, full voice
Public (more than 12 feet), teaching in classroom, loud voice

Kinesics: gestures, body movements, posture, facial expressions, eye contact

Basic facial expressions that many people identify throughout different cultures: anger, disgust, happiness, fear, sadness, surprise, contempt
Wide cultural variety of gestures that create different meaning in different cultures
Non-Verbal Communication: Typology and Dimensions II

Chronemics: the study of our use of time

- Cyclical or linear concepts of time
- Relationship between Past, Present, Future
- How late can you be? What kind of excuses?
  - “Mumbling something”
  - Slight apology
  - Mild insult that requires explanation
  - Rude behavior (not showing up without explanation)

Paralanguage

- Vocal characterizers (laughter, sobs)
- Vocal qualifiers (loud/soft, high/low pitch,
- Vocal segregates (“uh”, “um” “uh-huh”)
Non-Verbal Communication: Typology and Dimensions III

The Use of Silence: from agreement to apathy, sadness, thoughtfulness, respect, hostility

Haptics: the use of touch in communication

Clothing and physical appearance
Improving intercultural communication

- Know yourself
  - Know your culture
  - Know your personal attitude, be aware of your stereotypes
  - Know your communication style
    - Dominant, dramatic, contentious, animated, impression-leaving, relaxed, attentive, open, friendly
- Monitor yourself
Improving intercultural communication

- Learn a foreign language and go abroad!
- Consider the physical and human settings
  - Timing
  - Physical Setting
  - Customs
- Achieve clarity
  - State points clearly, explain jargon, be careful in your use of idioms, repeat key points, encourage to ask questions, check for understanding
Improving intercultural communication

- Develop empathy: imagine things from the point of view of others

- Try to listen, be aware that talking and listening has different values in different cultures

- Develop communication flexibility

- Learn to tolerate ambiguity
Some important points about cultures in Africa…..

- Communualism and importance of extended family
- Ethnicity and Diversity: allegiance to the kinfolk and ethnic group rather than to the state (Nigeria: one hundred million people, 270 linguistic groups)
- Friendship comes with obligations
- Colonial legacy
- Varied, but strong religiosity

(based on Richmond, Gestrin: Into Africa. Intercultural Insights)
Some important points about cultures in Africa.....

- Tradition of storytelling, proverbs, and lively debates
- Decisions are tried to be reached through consensus; don’t try to be confrontational or push a point
- Africans speak with great eloquence, but their language is often imprecise and their numbers inexact, ambiguity as an art
- In Africa, time is not necessarily money...
- .......but money matters....