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Teaching, learning and management: A case study of intercultural communication and education

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Abstract

A case study was conducted to examine the significance of intercultural communication awareness in a tertiary education context. There are two categories of participants for questionnaire and interview: staff members and students at the University of Tasmania. As all staff members/students at the University of Tasmania were directly or indirectly involved in the intercultural life of the university, both administrative and academic staff members-domestic and international students were invited to participate in this study. Participants were invited to participate in informal interviews as well as a questionnaire to present their views on intercultural communication and how it affects their interaction with people from different cultural backgrounds. The paper discussed the results of this study in terms of personal development, intercultural identity, and professional effectiveness.

Key words: intercultural communication, tertiary education, intercultural identity

Introduction

Globalisation is influencing universities worldwide through market competition. Internationalisation of education has become a significant development in Australian universities. With the increase of international students’ participation in on-line, in-country and face-to-face teaching modes, universities have promoted intercultural communication competence among their academic and administrative staff members. What does intercultural communication mean to these staff? Is it a new paradigm or a window dressing exercise? What are some of the hurdles in the process and implementation of intercultural awareness?

A case study was conducted to examine the significance of intercultural communication awareness in a tertiary education context. There were two categories of participants in the questionnaire: staff members and students at the University of Tasmania. As all staff members and students at the University of Tasmania were
directly or indirectly involved in the intercultural life of the university, they were
invited to take part in this study. Participants were invited to respond to a
questionnaire to present their views on intercultural communication and how it affects
their interaction with people from different cultural backgrounds, particularly
international students.

Background

Rapid development of international trade, improved technologies of communication
and transportation and the tendency of globalisation have greatly increased the
capacity for international interaction among people all over the world.
Internationalisation has become a catchword of the times in higher education and
globalisation is influencing universities world-wide through market competition and
radically changing the face of the university as an institution (Yang, 2002). According
to Yang, the meaning of internationalisation for a university should be the awareness
and operation of interactions within and between cultures through its teaching,
research and service functions, with the ultimate aim of achieving mutual
understanding across cultural borders.

According to Phatak, Bhagat and Kashlak (2005), as globalisation spreads to different
parts of the world, and cultural diversity increases in multinational and global
corporations, successful communication is critical. There is no denying that
intercultural communication is becoming a significant part of people’s daily life and
work. Tubbs and Moss (1994) defines intercultural communication as communication
between members of different cultures in terms of racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic
differences. In many parts of the world, people are interacting with at least one
culturally different person. This is a broad perspective, involving any type of cultural
differences between communication participants. For example, they may differ in
nationality, region, race, religion, status, occupation, gender, or age. However,
intercultural communication is a complex process. It involves differing perceptions,
attitudes and interpretation, and even two people from the same culture can have
intra-cultural communication problems. Lustig and Koester (1993) states:

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Intercultural communication is a symbolic, interpretive, transactional, contextual
process in which the degree of difference between people is large and important
enough to create dissimilar interpretations and expectations about what are
regarded as competent behaviours that should be used to create shared meanings
(p.58).
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Intercultural communication failure can lead to cultural shock and intercultural
maladjustment. One of the causes of the failure is a lack of adequate knowledge and
skills in intercultural communication. It is a common experience of international
students who study at Australian universities. As a result, the study of intercultural
communication has drawn considerable interest in Australian tertiary education. It is
of value not only to staff and international students but also to tertiary graduates who
should have the ability to communicate interculturally as “cultural differences are
indeed significant, especially in areas of dialogue and public participation” (Gerber &
Byram (1997) proposes a model of intercultural communicative competence which involves four elements: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and intercultural competence. Thus, successfully interacting with someone from a different culture requires a degree of communication competence, including cognitive, affective and behavioural components. In other words, for functionally effective communication, participants must share a set of patterns to explain, evaluate and predict communicative behaviours; otherwise efficient communication is impossible.

**A study and its aims**

A small study was conducted by two investigators with two different intercultural backgrounds. It aimed to investigate the perceptions of academic and administrative staff members as well as students at the University of Tasmania about the nature and role of intercultural communication in tertiary education. It focused on the following objectives:

- To understand how culture influences the interaction between people of different cultural groups;
- To examine their cross-cultural awareness;
- To identify possible problems in intercultural communication;
- To investigate cultural barriers in tertiary teaching and learning.

A questionnaire was the tool used in this study. It was designed to collect three broad types of information:

- Background information from each respondent about their personal and demographic characteristics.
- Information about individual experiences of problems with intercultural communication and how they react in these situations.
- Information relating to respondents’ awareness and knowledge of intercultural communication.

**Data Analysis and Results**

Data gathering involved the distribution of 90 questionnaires. Demographic information was obtained from the questionnaire which was completed by the following respondents: 70 students and 20 staff members. The data collected from the questionnaire in this study was entered into the SPSS (Sphinx Survey or Ethnography respectively) for analysis, focusing on any relationship between independent variables such as staff/student, male/female, domestic/international and dependent variables such as views and attitudes on intercultural communication in a university context. The items in the questionnaire provided an opportunity to gather information on the various participants’ perceptions of intercultural communication. The data provided information on two major aspects:

- Participants’ Demographic Background
- Views and Attitudes towards Intercultural Communication
Participants’ Demographic Background

**Student Background**

![Bar chart showing student background demographics](image)

**Figure 1: Student background**

The sample was almost evenly divided between male (51.40%) and female (48.60%). The majority of all respondents were aged between 20-30 years (51.40%), and the next largest group was between 31-40 years (37.10%). The native language background data indicated that most of the students are from a non-English speaking background (65.20%). Of the group surveyed, the majority (73.10%) are international students, most of whom are doing undergraduate study (64.20%). More than half of the students have studied for less than 2 years (45.70%) and the second largest group of students have studied for 2-5 years (42.90%). The educational specialisation of these students is mainly Sciences and Technology (32.90%), and the second major area of study is “others”, such as commerce and architecture (24.30% respectively).

**Staff Background**

![Bar chart showing staff background demographics](image)

**Figure 2: Staff background**

20 staff members at the University of Tasmania responded. The majority were female (65%) in the range between 31 to 40 years (40%). Of the group surveyed, the majority (65%) was academic staff members and 15% were administrative staff. The majority of the staff (68.40%) had worked at this university for less than five years. More than half of them (60%) often communicated with international students. Generally the staff members were well-qualified, as the majority (85%) was educated at the Master’s degree level or above.
Views and Attitudes towards Intercultural Communication

There were five major themes in the questionnaire:
- Meaning of intercultural communication.
- Perception of intercultural communication competence.
- Main strategies of effective communication.
- Successful intercultural interactions must be based on.
- The elements influence intercultural communication.

Responses to the following items were analysed to determine the means for each item:

**Theme 1. Meaning of Intercultural Communication**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Intercultural communication is about communication between people from different cultures.</td>
<td>1.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Intercultural communication happens only when we travel overseas.</td>
<td>4.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. When in another country, I try to learn as much about the culture of this country as possible.</td>
<td>1.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Intercultural communication is not important in education, especially for dealing with international students.</td>
<td>4.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Intercultural communication enriches our understanding of other cultures.</td>
<td>1.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1: meaning of intercultural communication**

The data shown in Table 1 indicate that both staff members and students fully agree with the statement that intercultural communication means to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds (mean 1.61) (Item 8). Both groups strongly disagree on Items 9 & 11 (means 4.21 and 4.52 respectively) and they are willing to learn from other cultures (mean 1.75) (Item 10). In addition, they consider that intercultural communication is an appropriate way to develop an understanding of other cultures. This view is shared by all respondents, as indicated in the table (mean 1.45) (Item 12).

**Theme 2. Perception of Intercultural Communication Competence**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Means</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. I feel uncomfortable communicating with people from different cultures.</td>
<td>3.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Establishing a good relationship with people from other cultures is difficult for me.</td>
<td>3.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Items</td>
<td>Means</td>
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<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Intercultural communication involves different communication</td>
<td>1.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and interaction styles when communicating with people from different cultures.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34. I feel at ease communicating with people from different cultures.</td>
<td>2.37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: Perception of Intercultural Communication Competence**

The data shown in Table 2 indicate that both staff members and students disagree on Items 14 & 16 (means 3.80 and 3.73 respectively) and agree on Items 17 & 34 (means 1.94 and 2.25 respectively). Nowadays, intercultural communication competence has become an important attribute for success people should possess.

**Theme 3. Main Strategies of Effective Communication**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Means</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student</td>
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<tr>
<td>19. Intercultural communication involves acknowledging differences</td>
<td>1.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in values and beliefs among cultures.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. Intercultural communication involves being skilled in giving</td>
<td>2.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feedback.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. Intercultural communication involves having some knowledge of</td>
<td>1.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other cultures.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. International students do well if staff values their cultural</td>
<td>2.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>backgrounds.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3: Main Strategies of Effective Communication**

The data shown in Table 3 indicate that both staff members and students generally agree on Items 19, 29 & 30 (means 1.67, 1.95 and 2.16 respectively). All respondents believe that it is of great importance to value and respect other cultures. In addition, the most interesting findings from the data emerged from the responses concerning whether or not intercultural communication involves being skilled in giving feedback (Item 26). There were slight differences of opinion reflected in the means. Staff disagreed about the importance of feedback, while students agreed that feedback was significant (means 2.37 and 2.73 respectively).

**Theme 4. Basis of Successful Intercultural Communication**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Means</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Successful intercultural interactions must be based on</td>
<td>1.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>understanding of equity.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4: Basis of Successful Intercultural Communication

The data shown in Table 4 indicate that both staff members and students agree on Item 18 (mean 1.97). However, both of them disagree on Item 21 (mean 3.34). It can be seen that sharing a common language is important in intercultural communication but not absolute. However, clearly, the respondents indicated that successful intercultural communication is not just based on using the same language. In terms of means attained, each group of respondents expressed disagreement with the statement that “Successful intercultural interactions must be based on using the same language”, reflected in the closeness of the means, i.e., means 3.31 – 3.90 (Item 24). Moreover, staff members do not think appropriate non-verbal communication is related to successful intercultural communication, while students were not certain about this proposition (means 2.89 versus 2.68) (Item 27).

Theme 5. Elements influence Intercultural Communication

Table 5: Elements influence Intercultural Communication

The data shown in Table 5 indicate that both staff members and students commonly accept that a good relationship is of great importance in intercultural communication; therefore they disagree with Item 25 (means 3.80 and 4.36 respectively). In addition, regarding the impact of electronic communication (item 32), the tendency seems to be neutral in terms of gender (means 2.55 and 2.42 respectively).

What do the data tell us?

Firstly, concerning gender, more female respondents than male respondents, considered that establishing a good relationship with people from other cultures is difficult. However, they both agree that intercultural communication must not just be based on appropriate verbal and non-verbal communication. Successful intercultural
interactions must be based on understanding of equity, acknowledging differences in values and beliefs among cultures, and viewing people from their cultural perspectives.

Secondly, concerning the different roles of staff and students at the university, this research study shows mixed results. It was the prevalent view of staff respondents that communicating with people from different cultures makes them uncomfortable sometimes. However, student respondents had divergent views on this matter. They feel at ease communicating with people from different cultures and intercultural communication enriches their understanding of other cultures as well as their own culture.

Thirdly, concerning native language background, the wide range of negative comments from respondents of English speaking background on the issues of dealing with cultural uncertainties is troublesome. For international students, weak English language skills are related to a number of negative outcomes. In particular, language barriers influence international students’ success in networking with domestic students.

Finally, the survey identified factors which both staff members and students believed would influence intercultural communication. The survey shows that many people now rely heavily on electronic communication, which they do not think is influenced much by intercultural interactions. It is undeniable that the possibility of meeting people from other cultures in virtual discourse through e-mail and the Web-based communication are other important instruments. Virtual reality, however, cannot replace face-to-face communication in the real world (Vogel, 2001).

This research study has investigated and addressed the perceptions of academic and administrative staff members as well as students at the University of Tasmania of the nature and role of intercultural communication in tertiary education. It can be seen that many of the research findings are quite unique to the literature review and could be regarded as corroborating studies conducted with other international students. In general, the research study results also show that in this study, both staff and students value the significance of intercultural communication in tertiary education. In the process of becoming intercultural, one experiences personal growth in many ways. According to Gudykunst (1994), an intercultural person is someone who has achieved an advanced level in the process of becoming intercultural and whose cognitive, affective, and behavioural characteristics are not limited but are open to growth beyond the psychological parameters of any one culture. What students can benefit from this process is so great that it will exert lifelong influence upon them. As mentioned early, students should plan to make intercultural communication a significant part of their career preparation.

**Conclusion**

The findings reported here came from an admittedly small research project sample on intercultural communication conducted at the University of Tasmania. Taken as a whole, results from the questionnaires in this study indicate that both staff members and students value intercultural communication in tertiary education areas. They appreciate interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds, to seek
common ground, celebrate diversity and also enjoy the privileges of being intercultural.

References