What is Intercultural Communication?

Inquire: Identifying Differences in Cultures

Overview

Cultures from around the world are now able to talk with one another in ways never before seen, thanks to modern technology. Learning from other cultures, and knowing how to communicate with members from other cultures, is a skill that will set you apart from others as you enter into the professional world. This lesson will explain what the terms culture and intercultural communication are, what ethical responsibilities you have toward members of other cultures, and how to adapt your message toward members of other cultures.

Big Question: When communicating with people from a different culture, do you think about how their culture is different from yours?

Watch: What is Culture?

In this lesson, we are going to learn about intercultural communication. This is the study of cultural norms of communication, cultural effects on the communication process, and how people from different cultures interact. To really understand what intercultural communication is, you need to know what culture is.

What do you think about when you hear the word “culture?” Do you think of a museum? Or a history book? Culture includes a whole lot, but for the purpose of this lesson, we have narrowed down the definition of culture to this: the way a particular group - age, ethnic, or social - believes or behaves. Your culture is taught to you beginning on the first day of your life, starting primarily with the clothes you are put in! The dress, shirt, pants, or whatever you were dressed in, is one of the ways you began learning your culture.

Can you think of other times when you learned your culture? Think about when you began school and your teacher taught you to stand in a line. This is a cultural norm that you learned, and continue to implement in daily life! Were you ever taught how to shake someone’s hand? Shaking hands when you meet a stranger is a cultural norm in Western society. All of these things culminate to teach you the cultural "norms" that people in that culture abide by.

You probably will notice if someone breaks a cultural norm or a cultural rule. Think about when someone is loud in a movie theatre. You notice, and might even become angry! This cultural rule is important to you and everyone around you, in order to watch the movie in a nice, quiet environment. One reason a person might be loud in a movie, however, might be because they grew up in a different culture than you. If that
is the case, you might have to implement intercultural communication to gently explain the situation, and ask them to quiet down so everyone can enjoy the movie.

There has probably been a time when you have had to intercultural communicate with another person, although you might not have even noticed that you did! In this lesson, you will learn what exactly intercultural communication is, and how to best implement this in your life.

Read: Intercultural Communication

Overview

In a world with easy communication methods that can connect a person with almost any place on the planet, it is important to understand what is intercultural communication. This chapter will define intercultural communication and culture, explain the ethical responsibilities a speaker has when working with other cultures, and how to adapt a message for an intercultural audience.

What is Intercultural Communication?

Intercultural communication is a field of study that is interested in the cultural norms of communication, cultural effects on the communication process, and how people from different cultures interact.

Cultural norms of communication are things within the communication process that differ from place to place. Is the oldest member of a conversation the person that has to signal an end to a conversation? That's a cultural norm. Such norms define cultural communication styles and help inform what a culture values as important. Studying cultural norms, and what those norms mean about a culture, is an important part of intercultural communication studies.

Similar to the norms of a culture, cultural effects on the communication process are very important to study. For instance, a culture that does not believe in physical contact with one another, except in intimate relationships, can alter the way that a communication process takes place. Because touch is a nonverbal form of communication that can help to send messages, the process is changed due to their cultural beliefs. Different cultures have different customs that impact the communication process in unique and varying ways.

When two cultures meet, how each member communicates is important and shows the values of the culture they are representing. Respecting someone else’s culture is very important, so intercultural communication scholars want to know about different cultures, customs, and how best to respectfully interact while still being effective in sending the desired message.

What is Culture?

Culture is the way a particular group - age, ethnic, or social - believes or behaves. Culture is something that is taught to a person from a very young age and usually has social repercussions for breaking cultural rules and norms. These aren’t the same as laws, but are more a form of stigmatization. Speeding is not a violation of cultural rules, so it is not socially punished. Tattoos at one point were a violation of American cultural rules, and so were socially punished when someone wasn’t hired because of having tattoos. However, some cultural norms can be enshrined in laws and carry legal penalty. Things like prohibition were laws born out of cultural rules.
Intercultural communication scholars spend time studying the impact culture has on how people act and communicate with one another. Culture is generally something that is unconscious in the way it happens. You learn that people are supposed to behave a certain way by watching others - usually your parents - behave in that certain way.

Ethical Responsibilities of Intercultural Communication

There are three main ethical responsibilities of intercultural communication: be respectful, be understanding, and be open. These three ethical responsibilities are all born out of an understanding that culture is neither right nor wrong; it just is a thing that happens. It also comes from an understanding that cultures are all different from one another. Some cultures have only minor differences, while other cultures have drastic differences. No matter how different a culture is from yours, when engaging members from another culture these three ethical principles will guide you to effectively communicating across cultural lines.

Being respectful means understanding that there are differences, possibly disagreements, between your culture and someone else’s, but that you should not attempt to shame them for those differences nor try to change them or their culture because you disagree with them. Cultural differences are important; discussing different approaches and understandings about the world is helpful in finding the best solutions to problems or creating the best ideas.

Being understanding toward a culture means not only allowing for differences in cultures, but making an effort to understand why a culture is different from your own. It also involves considering if there is a benefit to what another culture has to bring to the conversation.

Finally, being open prompts you to go beyond knowing about differences, and actually be open to trying things differently than you are used to based on someone else’s cultural norms. Being open to working with someone in a way they are most comfortable with is key to ensuring everyone involved in a project is able to meaningfully contribute.

How to Adapt a Message for an International Audience

The best way to adapt a message for an international audience is to learn about the cultures you are trying to adapt to, figure out what parts of your message need to be changed, and finally seek out feedback from people that are knowledgeable.

Learning about the other culture is the best starting place. Without knowing about the customs and culture of a group of people, you can not change how you present. Does the culture value being direct and efficient? Or does it value complex, elaborate explanations with stories, examples, and data? Only by doing some prep work and finding out what the audience wants from you can you hope to adapt.

Second, you need to figure out what parts of your message need to change based on these cultural differences. For example, instead of being to-the-point, you might instead find ways to make your message match what the audience wants. Figure out a story that can relate to your message. Find data to back it up. Change what you offer to match what the audience wants.

Finally, if you are unable to find out what or how to change your message, you should seek out someone that is knowledgeable about the culture. Has someone else from your work been to a place that this culture is dominant? Is a friend of yours a part of this culture? Can you find a video that explains some cultural norms? Seek out answers from an expert source so that the information you have is as accurate
as possible. Expert sources can also help provide tips to you on what specific aspects of your communication you should change. Never underestimate the power of an expert opinion!

Reflect Poll: The Prevalence of Intercultural Communication

In a normal week, how often do you engage with people from a different culture?

- None
- 1 or 2 times
- 3 to 5 times
- 6 to 8 times
- 9 or more times

Expand: Stereotypes and Microaggressions

Overview

Intercultural communication can be hard, as sometimes cultures are so drastically different that you don’t even know where to begin! When talking with someone from another culture it is easy to make a mistake or say something rude. This section will cover some of these mistakes and explain how to fix them: apologize and learn.

Stereotypes and Microaggressions

When thinking about a culture, one of the first things we do is consider how that group is portrayed on television or in a movie. These oversimplified representations of a group of people are called stereotypes. Stereotypes attempt to make it easier to understand a culture but fall short when they don’t account for the fact that not all people from a particular group are the same. Because each person is unique, stereotypes can be harmful and eliminate that individuality. When engaging with someone from a culture that you are not familiar with, do not try and assume you know what that person or their culture is like just because you have seen it represented in a movie. Be open and honest about what you do - or do not - know, and be open to learning throughout the conversation.

Microaggressions are subtle, small things that indirectly or unintentionally discriminate against a group. These often are presented as a compliment or an assumption but have hidden meanings that are not so polite. Asking a woman “Congratulations on the marriage! When are you having kids?” is a not so subtle way of assuming that a woman’s job is to have kids or that entering into a marriage has an objective of producing offspring. Likewise, being surprised that a man cooks or cleans their family home makes the assumption that all men are slobs, which they are not.

Fixing Mistakes

Microaggressions and stereotypes can be harmful to those affected by them. If you catch yourself using one or get told you have used one, there are simple steps to take in order to fix the mistake. First, apologize. Don’t make excuses or try to justify what you said. Just apologize and admit that you didn’t know. Second, promise to do better. Third, follow through on that promise by learning about why that stereotype or microaggression is wrong and how to avoid using it in the future.

This can be done a couple of different ways. You can ask the person. However, if you do this, understand it is not their job to teach you. If they do not want to, do not push them. If they do teach you, take what
they say to heart and learn from it. If they do not teach you, then seek other resources to teach yourself. Search engines are powerful tools to make this happen. The biggest thing to know is that mistakes happen, and the only way to get better is to learn and try to do better.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

This article provides tips and tricks for mastering the art of intercultural communication.
- Link to resource: https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/intercultural-communication.html

This article provides an in-depth look at ethical considerations in intercultural communication.
- Link to resource: http://boomerangconsulting.com/ethical-intercultural-communication/

This short video explains what a microaggression is and how we can go about correcting these behaviors.
- Link to resource: http://www.grandforksherald.com/video/GGNf6eMz

Lesson Glossary

**intercultural communication**: a field of study that is interested in cultural norms of communication, cultural effects on the communication process, and how people from different cultures interact.

**culture**: the way a particular group - age, ethnic, or social - believes or behaves.

**stereotypes**: oversimplified representations of a group of people.

**microaggressions**: subtle, small things that indirectly or unintentionally discriminate against a minority group.

Check Your Knowledge

1. Stereotypes are accurate representations of cultures.
   a. True
   b. False
2. Microaggressions are just compliments.
   a. True
   b. False
3. Apologizing is the best thing to do when you make a mistake and offend someone’s culture.
   a. True
   b. False

Answer Key:
1. B  2. B  3. A

Citations

Lesson Content:

Authored and curated by Alexander Amos, Elizabeth Amos for The TEL Library. CC BY NC SA 4.0