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Teaching intercultural communication in Polish higher education management programmes – a critical look

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Introduction

In the third millennium the global business environment requires managers to work with people who have different behavioral norms, values, and ways of thinking and perceiving reality. It demands high professional expertise and understanding of cultural diversity. An increasing proportion of work is conducted in multicultural teams. (Berthoin Antal, 1995; Davison, Ward, 1999). Some of the researchers have argued that workforce diversity can advance organizational efficiency and effectiveness by improving team performance. (Cox, 1993; Kirchmeyer, McLellan, 1991; Tung, 1993). International assignments in global corporations have immensely increased over the last few decades. More and more firms are exporting not only goods but work to countries across the globe. Physical distance or time differences are no longer barriers to foreign investment.

More and more people decide to work abroad because it can give them invaluable experience that will not only help them differentiate themselves from their competitors, but also help develop skills sets strongly valued by current or future employers. Working abroad teaches people how to handle ambiguity and new challenges. With workforces becoming more multicultural and diverse, learning a new language and developing cross-cultural communications

skills abroad served managers once they have returned home. Intercultural competencies are important for more people in business than ever before (Barham, Berthoin Antal, 1994; Lane, Maznevski, Mendenhall, McNett, 2004).

Perspectives on teaching intercultural communication

Corporations around the world to respond to the changes in the world's business environment either started in-house training programs or hired consultants to orient their employees before sending them overseas. (Brislin, Yoshida, 1994; Brislin, 1986; Clarke, 1990; Tung, 1988). Universities also have realized the importance of preparing their graduates to work in the international business environment. They started offering cross-cultural communication courses and adding international components into specialized subjects (e.g. international marketing). There is wide awareness of the need to include cultural dimensions in international business studies. Nevertheless, in Poland little attention has been paid to the development of appropriate programs and approaches.

Defining culture and intercultural communication

The relation between culture and communication might appear quite obvious to those influenced by postmodern, poststructuralist or cultural studies' thinking. Nevertheless, still there is a vast group of people, including theoreticians, who still refer to culture in terms of science, philosophy or arts. This traditional notion of culture has been defined by Scheler (Scheler, 1960, p.31) as the „higher forms of knowledge“. In the field of sociology, the “re-discovery” of culture goes back to such authors as Simmel. He considered fashion, dining or even prostitution as cultural phenomena. Scholars began perceiving culture as something linked to meaningful or symbolic action. Nevertheless, due to Saussure the turn towards communication had been possible. Without the work by authors such as Wittgenstein and Austin, who stressed that signs cannot be considered in isolation from the actions in which they are produced Habermas wouldn't be able to construct his „communicative paradigm“ (Habermas, 1988), which was characterized by the assumption that culture is being constructed in communicative actions. What is important is the fact that in that paradigm communicative action is meant to include the performance of social action in the use of language, nonverbal signs, cultural objects and artefacts. “Culture underlies every part of communication” (Crozet, Liddicoat, 2000, p.2).

The role of culture in the world of business has been the subject of various research for at least twenty-five years. Researchers have studied the influence or the impact of national cultures on organizational behavior and the way

managers from different cultural backgrounds interact with one another. (e.g. Adler, 2002; Hofstede, 1980, 1991; Trompenaars, Hampden-Turner, 1997, Early, Erez, 1997).

Most of the researchers use culture to refer to the quite stable characteristics of a group that differentiate it from other groups. More than half a decade ago, Kroeber and Kluckhohn (Kroeber, Kluckhohn, 1952, p. 181) presented a definition of culture that is still widely cited today: "patterns, explicit and implicit of and for behavior, acquired and transmitted by symbols [...]. The essential core of culture consists of tradition, ... ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other hand, as conditioning elements of future action."

One of the most commonly used definitions of culture, being not a complex one at the same time, in the literature on culture, negotiations and business in general has been provided by Geert Hofstede, who was the author of the first major empirical multi-country study of consequences that culture has for the field of management. Hofstede (Hofstede, 1980, p. 25) defines culture as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another." Most recently, project GLOBE - the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) has defined culture as "shared motives, values, beliefs, identities, and interpretations or meanings of significant events that result from common experiences of members of collectives that are transmitted across generations" (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, Gupta, 2004, p. 15). All of presented definitions suggest that common experiences and shared meaning constitute a cultural group.

Internationalization and globalization in one way or another is about intercultural communication. Some social scientists see intercultural communication as an academic discipline i.e. a branch of communication studies, with its characteristic ontological, epistemological and axiological assumptions. Others see intercultural communication more as a field of concern for several other academic disciplines i.e. psychology, social psychology, sociology, cultural anthropology and management). Gudykunst and Kim conceptualized the phenomenon of intercultural communication as "[...] a transactional, symbolic process involving the attribution of meaning between people from different cultures." (Gudykunst, Kim, 2003, p. 17).

Defining intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence

Communicating effectively in the intercultural environment is far more complex than simply knowing how to greet people correctly, being empathetic

and open to them or speaking their language fluently. If individuals want to be effective in intercultural setting they should go beyond understanding of observable behaviors and develop an understanding of the deeper content that is at the center of real messages.

According to M. Bennett, cross-cultural contacts do not belong to the circle peaceful processes. Bennett's model suggests a progression from ethnocentric stages of development to ethnorelative stages. This process facilitates intercultural sensitivity which leads to better cross cultural communication results. In the ethnocentric stage, the particular culture of the individual is perceived as dominant and central to the reality of all other cultures. In the latter stage, the individual in relation to one another within a particular cultural context understands cultures. Ethnorelativism perceives cultures as different, neither bad nor good. Bennett's model includes six stages of intercultural sensitivity. Three of these stages are ethnocentric and three are ethnorelative.

Ethnocentric

denial

defense

minimization

Ethnorelative

acceptance

adaptation

integration

The assumption that underlays this model is that as a person progresses through the successive stages of ethnocentrism and advances to ethnorelativism, the individual gains a greater awareness of his or her own and other cultures. Consequently the skills needed to communicate effectively on an intercultural basis become more advanced.

Intercultural communication competence (ICC) has been studied extensively (Gudykunst, Kim, 1984; Littlejohn, Jabusch, 1982; Powers, Lowery, 1984). The term refers to the skills, talents, and strategies in which we engage in order to exchange thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and beliefs among people of different cultural backgrounds. Wiseman (2001) defined ICC as the comprised form of knowledge, skills, and motivation necessary to interact effectively and appropriately with individuals from different cultures. The components of ICC can be both learned (e.g. language) and inherited (e.g. personal traits).

Intercultural sensitivity (IS) was defined by Barnlund and Namura (Barnlund, Namura, 1985) in terms of the concept of "empathy". They pointed out that to maintain communication in an intercultural context, one must face the challenge arising from the necessity of understanding someone from another world or culture with a sufficient margin of empathy. Among personal attributes of intercultural sensitivity one can find for instance: willingness to accept others' explanations, an optimistic outlook that inspires confidence in

intercultural interactions, no prejudices that will prevent one from listening sincerely, the ability to overcome uncertain emotions during the interaction etc. (Chen, Starosta, 2001)

The literature shows that most of the scholars who studied ICC and IS have noted that the more intercultural sensitivity a person has, the more intercultural competent he or she can be.

Language

Majority of people consider learning native language of counterparts', as the first step of successful communication among people from different cultures. Most of the Polish management programs include foreign language courses. All too often that is everything a student is offered to become competent in the global workplace environment. However, knowing a foreign language is not enough for individuals who want to communicate effectively with different cultures, they should also know the so called "silent language of communication" such as colors, distance, perception, mimics, gestures, kinetics etc. (Daniels et al, 2004).

Language is a significant element of intercultural communication. Like culture in general, language is learned and it serves to transmit thoughts; in addition it conveys values, beliefs, perceptions, norms, etc.

Language is a fundamental tool that humans use to both construct and exchange meaning with one another. Culture is in language, and language is loaded with culture. (Agar 1994, p.28) In order to be able to communicate successfully, it is necessary to fully understand the cultural context in which language is used. "Language gives people a means of interacting with other members of their culture and a means of thinking. Language thus serves both as a mechanism for communication and as a guide to social reality" (Samovar, Porter, 1982, p.17).

Developing a high level of linguistic competence is not enough. It has been observed that, when non-native speakers are able to use the language on a level near to native there is also an implicit expectation that they will behave according to the sociocultural norms of a particular cultural group. (Gass, Varonis, 1991).

The importance of language to intercultural communication is obvious when cultures speak different languages. Yet, differences in meaning across culture can be a stumbling block in communication also when each culture uses the same language (e.g. British vs American). Objects, events, experiences, and feelings have a particular label or name because a certain community of people have arbitrarily decided to name them that way. Language serves both as a mechanism for communication and as a guide to social reality.

The extreme Whorfian position tells us that individuals who speak different languages live in different worlds. This position is based on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis which sees language as a filter between an individual and the environment in which he or she lives. Research has shown considerable support for this hypothesis (Bloom, 1981; Garro, 1986; Hoosain, 1991; Davies, Sowden, Jerrett, Jerrett, and Corbett, 1998) but there have also been challenges to it, especially with regard to the influence of language lexicons and semantics (Au, 1983; Berlin, Kay, 1969; Rosch, Lloyd, 1978).

Kramersch's (Kramersch 1993, 1998) work had a substantial impact on the study of language and culture, and pointed out that it seems difficult for language teaching to occur without teaching about the culture of the language being taught. It is so because language is invariably shaped by culture.

It is worth stressing that culture not only affects language lexicons, but also its function or pragmatics. Kashima and Kashima (Kashima, Kashima, 1998) examined nearly 40 languages and found that cultures whose languages allowed for pronouns to be dropped from sentences tended to be less individualistic, which they interpreted as reflecting different cultural conceptualizations of self and others.

Literature, history, religion

Students of intercultural communication read almost exclusively the writings of social scientists. However, literature genres such as prose, poetry or biography as well as film could be used more often to illustrate what aforementioned scientists have discussed. The potential of literature and film for the understanding of intercultural relations is still underestimated. Literature allows for more varied manner of storytelling than does the conventional social-science genre. It allows for a broader spectrum of points of view, more emotional involvement, and the taking of a stand on issues.

Knowledge of history serves future business people well. Most of people are respected if the interlocutor knows something about the history of their nation and respect is one of the goals of intercultural communication. A knowledge of history is also very important for interpretation of those aspects of people's behavior that are responses to past and present mistreatment.

Religion is still neglected in management programmes. By showing respect for the religious beliefs and practices of others, and understanding what priority they have in a hierarchy of values, and individual strongly enhances the possibility for being successful in situations that include intercultural communication.

Non-verbal communication and cultural competence

Human communication is a „multi channel reality” (Poyatos, 1983, p. 175): consisting of language, paralinguage and facial expressions, gaze, gestures, postures, head and body movements, haptics and proxemics (Wallbott, 1994; Burgoonet al., 2006).

Nonverbal communication is a complex phenomenon. It is complex to study because of the fact that nonverbal communication can be unintentional, unconscious and idiosyncratic.

There is no doubt that nonverbal communication research does have considerable practical significance. Of enormous influence has been the proposal that social behaviour can be regarded as a skill (Argyle, Kendon, 1967). To become an accurate diagnostician of cultural differences in interpersonal communication having competence in the verbal language is not enough. Proficiency in its non verbal language is also required (Elfenbein, Ambady, 2002).

Among one of the most important facets of nonverbal communication which generates quite a lot of problems in intercultural setting are non verbal gestures (Efron, 1941; Ekman, Friesen, 1969; Kendon, 1994, 1997). Gestures serve the purpose of furthering shared understanding and communication (Archer, 1997; Collett, 1993; Morris, Collett, Marsh, O’Shaughnessy, 1979). As the anthropologist Edward Sapir (Sapir, 1949, p. 554) has written, gestures are a key part of the “secret code” of a cultural group that is “written nowhere, known by none and understood by all”. Gesture recognition ability, to be considered a meaningful indicator of cultural adjustment, should not only be associated with an individual’s length of stay in particular culture but also with perceptions of that individual’s intercultural communication competence.

People who are able to diagnose the logic of a foreign culture’s system of values as well as beliefs and norms had effective relationships with coworkers and high levels of cooperation with host nationals (Fiedler et al., 1971; Worchel, Mitchell, 1972). Researchers claim that the ability to diagnose nonverbal behavior accurately is related to positive interpersonal outcomes. People who scored high on such measures reported having high quality relationships and were perceived as socially skilled (Costanzo, Archer, 1989; Rosenthal et al., 1979). Seldom do the Polish management programs include courses concerning non-verbal communication.

A unique approach

It is worth stressing that notions of culturally appropriate behavior are often based on models, such as those of Hofstede (1980), Trompenaars and Hampden-

Turner (1997), Gudykunst (1994) that treat the influence of national culture on its members as quite deterministic (Anakwe, 2002; Blanton, Barbuto, 2005).

This knowledge can be useful, but it is worth stressing that it can also be misleading in specific intercultural interactions. It can happen because individuals are culturally complex beings, not standardized products of a national culture. Their thinking style and behavior can vary from a general model (Adler, 2002; Rohner, 1984; Schneider, Barsoux, 1997; Weiss, 2003). Furthermore, what frame of reference would be appropriate in multicultural situations, such as a team composed, for example, of Germans, Chinese, Indians, Moroccans and Brazilians (Weiss, 2003)?

Research comparing more successful international managers with their less successful peers has demonstrated the importance of treating each interaction as unique (Ratiu, 1983).

Conclusions

The effect of international communication and modern transportation infrastructures during the twentieth century and the first decade of twenty-first century has eliminated the once large barrier of geographic distance that existed between individuals, cultures and nations. We are forced, because it is not a matter of choice, to adapt higher levels of intercultural sensitivity in cross-cultural exchanges if we want to avoid conflict and self-destructive tendencies. People who are responsible for creating university programmes in Poland must rethink their approach to intercultural communication and take a broader look on the role of culture in business. By engaging in critical thinking about cross-cultural differences and being open and flexible to new ways of thinking, people add new cognitive schemas in their minds to represent the world.

At the very beginning the term “third millennium” was used. The question is though, whose third millennium? Muslim, Hindu or Christian?

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Abstract

In the third millennium the global business environment requires managers to work with people who have different behavioral norms, values, and ways of thinking and perceiving reality. It demands high professional expertise and understanding of cultural diversity. An increasing proportion of work is conducted in multicultural teams. Universities also have realized the importance of preparing their graduates to work in the international business environment. However, do the programmes include all the necessary components?