

"INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION" TRAINING A BRIDGE FOR HUMAN UNDERSTANDING

by Dr. Kenneth Eugene Mann

In today's world, "intercultural communication" is the most accepted term for describing the interaction between two people from different cultures. The following terms, however, are also used to describe the same process: "cross cultural communication," "transcultural communication," "interracial communication," and "transracial communication." Although these terms are used synonymously, "intercultural communication" is most suitable, since it describes all situations that exist when people of different cultures attempt to communicate. For example, when describing the communication between two people of the same race, country, and religion, but from different economic levels (one poor and the other wealthy), only the term "intercultural communication" is appropriate. Although some might argue that these two individuals are of the same culture, the communication difficulties that they will experience will be just as acute as when there are differences in nationality, race, or skin color.

Training in "intercultural communication" must not and cannot be limited by such things as racial differences or skin pigmentation. The major emphasis of any such program should be on individual awareness of the differences and similarities between people. Students need to realize that the more differences existing, the greater the dilemma as people attempt to communicate with one another. Whether a training program in "intercultural communication" consists of a semester course or merely a unit of study, certain approaches should be avoided. For example, most individuals think of culture as the way people dress, their beliefs, and the customs

they practice.¹ When dealing with "intercultural communication," a concentration on the way people dress causes problems because it is too easy to assume that those dressing alike have the same beliefs, values, and behavior. In addition, the connection between beliefs and behavior are seldom obvious. Although an examination of the customs that people practice will give some guidelines, they do not indicate how individuals will interact in an "intercultural communication" situation. In addition, "intercultural communication" training is not a matter of teaching the do's and don'ts of conversing with someone of another culture. This type of approach merely reveals a failure to understand the cultural concept. Instead of a concentration on specific rules, there should be a focus on the general rules. For example, Americans communicate praise, abuse, blame, status, and anticipation (to name only a few) by using time. It would be impossible for a foreigner in the United States to attempt to memorize all the ways in which time is employed. However, if this same individual were to learn that time awareness is a part of our cultural whole, he would begin to understand the cues or time messages that he observes and receives during his stay in the United States.

It becomes extremely easy for the teacher of an "intercultural communication" training program to concentrate on cultural differences, customs, and idiosyncrasies. It is entertaining for the students and rather enjoyable to parade various "strange" practices before the minds of students. Such

¹Edward T. Hall and William F. Whyte, *Intercultural Communication: A Guide to Men of Action*, Ithaca: New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations, 1960, page 5.

an approach, however, does not provide students with the background, the knowledge, or the skill to deal with the vast number of "intercultural communication" situations that they will likely encounter.

The objectives of a course or training program in "intercultural communication" should be to help students (1) see their own society or culture as one pattern of living among many, (2) distinguish the characteristics of at least one other culture, and (3) learn to focus on gaining an understanding of how people of other cultures attempt to communicate both verbally and non-verbally. These objectives can best be accomplished by assisting students to realize the importance of at least six areas of concern.

First, students must realize that languages cannot be translated exactly word for word because the meanings of certain phrases change from language to language. Students need to be made aware that many misunderstandings are the result of slang and idiomatic expressions. Most teachers of English as a second language are to be commended for their efforts in this area.

A second area of concern includes the tone of voice, use of gestures, and facial expressions.² Students need to be aware that the tone of the voice communicates meaning just like words, but that meaning varies from culture to culture. For example, because of the intense inflections of Spanish used along the United States and Mexican border, many American observers have misinterpreted normal conversations to be angry encounters. Likewise, gestures do not have universal meanings. A wave in one culture will call someone to you in another. A perfectly acceptable gesture in one society is a means of insulting someone in another. The student must realize what ways of communicating are acceptable in the culture in which he happens to be residing.

Third, students must become aware of how a culture interprets physical

contact--shaking hands, touching, and distance from each other when talking. **The Silent Language** is an excellent source for such information.³ For those people who will be dealing with individuals of other cultures, especially in a business way, an awareness of this problem may mean the difference between success and failure.

The fourth area has already been alluded to in this paper--the dimension of time. Students of "intercultural communication" need to be aware that cultures look at time in different ways. It does not receive emphasis in some societies and varies in importance from culture to culture. It would be fruitless to instruct students in the concept of time in each area of the world, but they should be taught to be keen observers of the phenomenon.

Fifth, some topics of discussion are completely inappropriate in certain cultures under specific circumstances. This is an area that will require more than mere observation to keep from committing blunders. An

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additional problem is that these restraints are continuously changing at a rapid rate. For example, it has always been poor taste to discuss certain topics in mixed company in the United States. Since the origination of the current Women's Lib Movement, this restriction is being re-examined and questioned by some people.

A sixth area that students of "intercultural communication" must investigate is that of class contacts. In some societies, people perform their business in a one-to-one relationship; in others, a delegation is employed; in still others, a third party or negotiator is used. Observation will have to be the basis for

² Alice C. Pack gives examples of and discusses Kinesics and Culture in the following issues of the **TESL Reporter**, Fall 1972, Winter 1973, and Spring 1973.

³ Edward T. Hall, **The Silent Language**, Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Premier Book, 1959.

functioning correctly from one culture to another.

Any training program in "intercultural communication" should consider the above six areas as a minimum. An additional objective for such a program should be to get students to become aware of the similarities existing between people of various cultures. If individuals of various cultures come to realize that they are more alike than different, and they honestly want

to work out any existing difficulties, all barriers between them can be overcome. Training in "intercultural communication" can be the bridge to help bring about understanding among peoples and nations. This type of training will enable students (future leaders of the world) to function in "intercultural communication" situations with a greater degree of success and effectiveness.