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CCH SEMINAR INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: A SHORT COURSE IN HUMAN AWARENESS

by Kenneth Eugene Mann

Foreign students in the United States encounter a number of difficulties because of the cultural differences that they find. These difficulties range from cultural shock to total communication failure. Since the student body at the Church College of Hawaii consists of about 50% foreign students, intercultural communication is of prime concern on campus. On March 28, 1974, the first Intercultural Communication Seminar was held, exploring some of the problems, anxieties, and frustrations experi-

enced by the foreign students at the Church College of Hawaii. The participants of the Seminar took part in exciting discussions in which intellectually stimulating ideas were shared, resulting in an increased awareness for peoples of other cultures.

Dr. Peter Strevens, well known writer and professor of Applied Linguistics, served as the guest speaker for the Seminar. Dr. Larry Smith of the Cultural Learning Institute at the East-West Center in Honolulu introduced Professor Strevens. Other speakers, panelists, participants, and observers were administrators, faculty, and students at the Church College of Hawaii. The purpose of the Seminar was "to help meet the needs" of those "who might benefit from the accumulated experience and skills" of people who have specialized in the area of intercultural communication.

The barriers to intercultural communication are widespread and varied. Even though they are somewhat easy to identify, the barriers are difficult to bridge. Solutions are frequently a long time in coming because human behavior is somewhat whimsical. In addition, a particular solution will not solve all intercultural communication problems of a similar type. There is also the problem involving cultural traditions. Since culture is the man made part of the environment and is learned, ethnocentrism plays an extremely prominent role and may even become a barrier to communication. People do things in

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that is the "correct" way to do them. Professor Stevens pointed out "that because society X does something one way and society Y does things another way, that of course does not mean that X is better or worse than Y."¹ In fact, he warned that one of the most "difficult things to stop doing is making value judgments about other people's cultures."² People need to recognize that cultures differ in standards of beauty, values, and attitudes. The successful intercultural communicator realizes that "all cultures have traditional values that have been institutionalized, and knows something about those values."³ He must also keep in mind that "All cultures are valuable. No culture is inheritantly

Dr. Mann, who received his Ph. D. in Speech-Communication from Indiana University, has taught at Purdue and Indiana Universities and has published several articles concerning Intercultural Communication.

superior to any other. They are all different."⁴ As a result, each culture has something that it can contribute, something about which other societies can learn and by which others can be enriched.

As communication technology continues to be developed, the peoples of the world are coming more in contact with each other. Thus, the problems of intercultural communication are real and are "becoming increasingly important as the world shrinks."⁵ The conditions in this world, with the ever present threat of war in various parts of the globe, makes the need critical for "renewed and constructive dialogue, reasoned discourse among and between cultures, nations, and the accumulated experience and skills" of peoples."⁶

¹ Speech of Peter Stevens, *Intercultural Communication Seminar, Church College of Hawaii, Laie, Hawaii, March 28, 1974.*

² Stevens

³ Larry Samovar and Richard Porter, *Intercultural Communication, A Reader*, Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Co., Inc., 1972, 35.

⁴ Stevens

⁵ Stevens

⁶ L.S. Harms, *Intercultural Communication*, New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1973, 2.

It is essential for anyone involved in communicating on an intercultural basis to remember that "communication and culture are intertwined at almost every point."⁷ It is impossible to separate them. When an individual converses with someone of another society, he must find the common frames of reference or face the reality of failure in his communicative attempts. The situation is eased somewhat if both individuals are aware of the additional barriers that are present when each comes from a different culture. However, that is an extremely idealistic situation that rarely is reality. Most communicative attempts of the former type are doomed to failure almost from the beginning.

The more an individual knows and understands about a culture, the more likely he will be able to talk to someone of that culture without offending him. However, it is essential to "remember that cultural beliefs are not immutable. They may and very often do change and in differing rates."⁸

The learning of the language broadens our cultural experience. In fact, Dr. Stevens explained, "Multi-lingualism means, to some extent at least, multi-culturalism."⁹ But learning the language is not always possible or even practical.

The process of communication is not simple. That process is influenced, made more difficult or easy, by any number of factors. When people from the same culture talk to each other, "they do it on the basis of shared cultural beliefs."¹⁰ Anytime individuals communicate, orally or in writing, they convey information about themselves, their purposes for communicating, the degree of formality and informality, and the social relationships that exist. Each time another element is present in the communication process, the communicative attempt becomes more difficult. The intercultural situation is merely one additional factor that complicates the communicative process. It is necessary to keep in mind that when an individual operates according to one set of cultural values and his foreign friend operates under a quite different set of cultural traditions and values, problems will almost

⁷ Michael H. Prosser, *Intercommunication Among Nations and Peoples*, New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1973, x.

⁸ Stevens

⁹ Stevens

¹⁰ Stevens

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certainly arise. For understanding to take place, both individuals must be aware that "every aspect of an individual's life is touched by the ideas, the customs, and the beliefs of one society."¹¹ When a person functions in another culture or communicates with someone from another culture, he must change or discard some of his habits and methods of behaving or intercultural communication failure will likely occur. Perhaps, Sitaram best clarifies this idea, "Intercultural Communication does not take place in a vacuum."¹² The differences in cultural traditions and the variety of styles "is what makes intercultural communication both difficult and important."¹³

Dr. Strevens indicated that both verbal and non-verbal communication "is more delicate and more culturally loaded than we realize." This is true simply because "some of the most obvious beliefs of our own culture may turn out to be not at all obvious . . . to people of other cultures."¹⁴ However, beliefs are not the only problem causing aspects of cultural traditions. Kinesics or body language is also an area that is not without difficulty. There is no such thing as universal meanings for gestures and body movement. Instead, a perfectly acceptable gesture in one society is a means of insulting someone in another. Sitaram substantiates this by explaining that "an effective communication symbol in one culture can be an obscene gesture in another."¹⁵ The nature of communication between individuals of different societies is such that a person can commit such an offense quite innocently. He may still find himself in a precarious position if he uses the same communication gestures in Australia, for example, that proved successful in the United States.

¹¹ Strevens

¹² K.S. Sitaram, "What is Intercultural Communication," *Intercultural Communication, A Reader*, Larry Samovar and Richard Porter (eds), Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1972, 23

¹³ Harms, 5.

¹⁴ Strevens

¹⁵ Sitaram, 19.

It almost seems unavoidable that when individuals of different cultures communicate, "the existence of different ways and customs and attitudes come to the surface."¹⁶ This often results in anger and hostility between all concerned. A natural consequence of anger and hostility is prejudice and discrimination. Teachers, at all levels, must especially be cautious and aware

Professor Peter Strevens, (pictured at right) with a Ph.D. in French and German and work experience at the University of Ghana, West Africa, holds professorships at the University of Leeds, University of Edinburgh and most recently the University of Essex, where he is professor of Applied Linguistics, as well as Director of the Language Center.

of the problems in this area.

Everyone has prejudices, but the research clearly substantiates that a person is not born with them. Prejudices emerge as the individual grows older. Dr. Ian Stevenson, a noted psychiatrist at the University of Virginia Medical School, explains that studies have shown "prejudice is slight or absent among children in the first and second grades. It increases thereafter." As we associate with other individuals, we are taught to look down on those that are different from us. "The job of the educated citizen," Dr. Strevens reasoned, "no matter where he lives or the society from which he comes, is to overcome his cultural prejudices."¹⁷ Although reasoned discourse is essential, there is also the problem of attitude. The barriers of prejudice and discrimination will continue to plague mankind until we learn to be more kind and show forth charity toward all individuals, groups and peoples.

Perhaps one of the most effective means to bring about better communication and understanding among peoples and individuals of different cultures is to bring them together in workshops and training sessions. This has produced interesting (but predicted) results in a number of experimental studies

¹⁶ Strevens

¹⁷ Strevens



conducted across the United States. It seems that generally the better we get to know and understand a people, the more we lose our prejudices and hostile feelings toward them.

One of the greatest fallacies in reasoning that we make is that understanding each other occurs when we talk with each other. However, talking with someone cannot be equated with communicating with someone. This is especially true in an intercultural communication situation. It is extremely important that we come to realize that the peoples of the world (even when using a single language) do not speak alike. Even more important is the realization that we do not think alike either. Every culture and society "has its own modes of thought and its own selected areas which constitute the subject matter it chooses to think about."¹⁸ In other words, every culture has its own value system by which it operates. It is the task of the educated person, according to

¹⁸ Robert T. Oliver, *Culture and Communication*, Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, Publisher, 1962, xi.

¹⁹ Strevens

Professor Strevens, to "realize that it is part of the nature of mankind to have different cultures and to accept this and not count a difference as being something to disdain."¹⁹

The purpose of the above article was to summarize (in essay form) many of the ideas expressed in the Intercultural Communication Seminar at the Church College of Hawaii on March 28, 1974. Many of the ideas are supported by comments of prominent writers in the area of intercultural communication. A complete report of the Seminar, including the complete speech by Professor Peter Strevens, outlines of the workshops, and recommendations, is available upon request by writing Division of Communication and Language Arts, Church College of Hawaii, Laie, Hawaii, 96762. In order to help defray the cost of printing and postage please send \$1.00 with your request for the Seminar Report. Allow six weeks for delivery.