

Good Intentions are not Enough: CROSS-CULTURAL TRAINING for seafarers, a MUST-HAVE of Intercultural education

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Abstract

Maritime transportation forms an integral part of what regulatory agencies requires for the safe navigation and operation of vessels. Therefore, the maritime industry's compliance with governmental regulations and international protocols has been essential for maritime safety management. As a basis to this aspect, the preparation of maritime students as the forthcoming maritime officers in the future has been a crucial point by the maritime educators in terms of maritime safety.

Despite unquestionably good intentions on the parts of most people who call themselves intercultural educators, most intercultural education practice supports, rather than challenging, dominant hegemony, prevailing social hierarchies, and inequitable distributions of power and privilege.

Training Programs designed for preparing seafarers for working in multinational environment are usually referred to as "Cross-Cultural or Intercultural Orientation Programs." It seems that the early practitioners and researchers viewed preparing people for international assignment as a process in which one needed to be oriented to the differences in social interactions between the two cultures. However, researchers and practitioners alike are realizing that we need to do more than orient people to prepare them to live abroad and the field is being referred to as "Cross-Cultural or Intercultural Training" by more and more people.

A seafarer must be trained to demonstrate the ability to communicate effectively and to exchange information in carrying out his/her responsibilities. Relying on the modern educational theory, the maritime lecturer has to find the way to describe how intercultural communication should be taught.

The aim of this paper is to bring forth the importance of teaching intercultural communication skills to the seafarer who is to embark on a multilingual vessel, and to point out specific instruction and evaluation of communication skills as they relate to the seafarers responsibilities including good communication with his/her peers.

Key words: *cross-cultural training, MET, seafarer, maritime lecturer, teaching intercultural communication*

“Each one of us is an artist creating an authentic life”
SARAH BAN BREATHNACH

Introduction

In response to different views for various *Training Programs*, publishers are including cultural information in their ESL texts, and teachers are beginning to recognize the importance of the underlying dynamics of a culture in Language Communication. Such steps are laudable, but they may fall short of the mark when it comes to actually equipping students with the cognitive skills they need in a second-culture environment.

From country to country, social taboos, politics, and religious traditions and values differ. These cultural variables need to be respected if students are to benefit from new experiences. Yet the commercial market today does not seem to have a universally applicable Intercultural Communication program or text that is suitable for culturally divergent student populations. To compensate for the lack of Intercultural Communication materials, teachers or instructors often need to develop their own Intercultural Communication courses that meet local standards of acceptability. Once teachers/instructors understand the basic concepts of cultural comparison, they can develop appropriate learning materials.

This paper will outline the one semester course (14 weeks-28 hours) in Intercultural Communication at Constanta Maritime University that develops the students' cognition skills needed to understand life in multicultural crews on board ships. The initial part of such a course is intended to heighten the participant's awareness of his or her own culture; the latter part focuses on assumptions, values, and behaviors of the target culture. Although the course described herein is designed for culturally homogeneous classes, it could serve as a model for multicultural groups anywhere.

Therefore this paper will describe in its first part the basic parameters of the Intercultural Communication Course along with the units of its contents and the basic reality assumptions as the themes of this two-part course. The Methodology and the Pedagogical approach will be analyzed in the second part of this paper, so to be able to discuss the recommendations in the end it.

1. Listening! The Foundation for change!

The ability and need to communicate touches every area of our lives. Everything we do in life requires communication with others. Just try to not communicate at work for a day or in your business transactions and see what happens. Refuse to communicate in your personal relationships and see what kind of interesting results you'll create. Much of communication theory focuses on how to speak to others and how to convey your message. But, communication is really a two-way process. It is an *activity*, not a one-time event. The listener's role is as central to the communication process as the speaker's role. Real communication and connection occur when the Speaker AND Listener participate in the process.



Listening is the key for understanding others and building strong relationships. Three dynamics are involved in each relationship: *rapport*, *control* and *trust*. Therefore there are three types of Listening. These include *selling yourself listening*, *control listening*, and *attentive listening*.

a. **Selling yourself listening: Wanting to lead**

You listen briefly and then interrupt to disagree, give advice, or sell your perspective to the other person.

b. **Control Listening: Wanting to Clarify**

You use questions to control the direction of conversation. The Four kinds of Control Questions (John Nielsen, 2008) include the following:

1. *Why* questions
2. Leading questions
3. Closed ended questions
4. Multiple questions

c. **Attentive Listening: Wanting to discover**

This type of listening helps gain an overview, understand, deal with “what is”, and connect with others.

Now, let’s look at the skills involved with the listening cycle:

Skill no.1: Looking, Listening, Monitoring Congruencies

This skill involves establishing *rapport* – matching to create rapport- and tracking dialogues and attitudes. Look and listen for opportunities to service to other person.

Skill no.2: Acknowledge Messages

Validate what the other person says at different junctures even if you don't agree. I don't have to agree. However when I acknowledge the other person, I'm telling them that what they say has value.

Skill no.3: Invite More Information

Ask for more information in a user-friendly way even when you don't know what to do.

Skill no.4: Gaining Understanding and Clarifying

Asking open-ended question (in a user-friendly way) and checking out your interpretations. Checking out body language for congruence or mixed messages.

Skill no.5: Summarizing- to Ensure Accuracy of Understanding

This process guarantees understanding by summarizing the essence of the message. Paraphrase what you actually hear. Focus on the speaker's message. Don't rebut. Summarizing shows understanding and punctuates a conversation.

We all need to feel that we are being heard and understood. It is a basic human need that is as primary a need as having enough water, food or air to survive. So, try out any of these suggestions and you will experience more of a connection to those around you. And, if all else fails just remember these words by Epictetus, an ancient Greek philosopher, and you are guaranteed to improve your listening skills: "*Nature gave us one tongue and two ears so we could hear twice as much as we speak.*"

2. Organizational Culture and Communication

What is meant by organizations having a 'culture'? Countries and ethnic and religious groups have cultures at a large or 'macro' level, but such a term is increasingly being applied in a 'micro' way to describe the attitudes, values and behavior present in an organization. I explore here the idea of organizations having cultures and what impact this might have with communication within those workplaces generally and within the seafarer's environment particularly.

In the past few decades, researchers have suggested that organizations do indeed have their own cultures, and that they have a dramatic effect on communication patterns and practices. An organization's culture is its 'personality', its feel, what distinguishes it from other organizations, a coding of 'the way things get down around here'. An organization's culture is most apparent to an outsider interacting with the organization for the first time, or when two organizations merge or experience a takeover.

Management scholars Stephen Robbins and Neil Barnwell suggest that the following are key characteristics of organizational culture:

1. *individual initiative*- the degree of responsibility, freedom and independence that individuals have;
2. *risk tolerance*- the degree to which employees are encouraged to be aggressive, innovative and risk seeking;

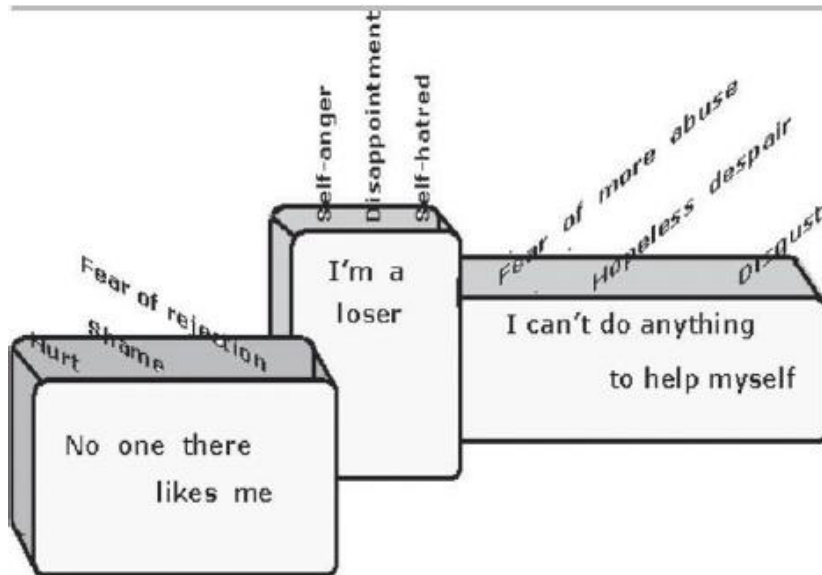
3. *direction* – the degree to which the organization creates clear objectives and performance expectations;
4. *integration* - the degree to which units within the organization are encouraged to operate in a coordinated manner;
5. *management contact* - the degree to which managers provide clear communication, assistance and support to their subordinates;
6. *control*- the degree to which rules and regulations, and direct supervision, are used to oversee and control employee behavior;
7. *identity* - the degree to which members identify with the organization as a whole, rather than with their particular work group or field of professional expertise;
8. *reward system*- the degree to which reward allocations (that is salary increases, promotions) are based on employee performance criteria;
9. *conflict tolerance*- the degree to which employees are encouraged to air conflicts and criticism openly;
10. *communication patterns* - the degree to which organizational communications are restricted to the formal line hierarchy of command;

Culture is also transmitted in other ways, such as:

- *Rituals* - recognition and reward ceremonies, Friday afternoon or after-hours socializing, annual company picnics, contests, initiations;
- *Stories* – myths, gossip, jokes, anecdotes, narratives about people, events and things;
- *Material symbols*- the non-verbal communication of clothing, grooming, furniture, vehicles, parking, perks;
- *Language*- specialized language, jargon, nicknames and so on.

Some of these expressions are initiated and maintained by the formal organizational system, while some are also initiated and maintained by the informal organizational system.

To enter another culture with only the vaguest notion of its underlying dynamics, reflects not only “a provincial naiveté but a dangerous form of cultural arrogance” (Barnlund 1991).



In helping workers/seafarers to keep daily activities in line with appropriate feelings and worthwhile purposes, management has three major responsibilities:

- a. To make the fact of work and of daily work relationships such that they do not necessarily deaden appropriate feelings;
- b. To communicate its own purposes about work, and its feelings about the employee relationship, in such a way that employees can understand and assent;
- c. To develop better communication, so that the suitable feelings and purposes of management and workers can be put to work to strengthen the bonds of group living.

3. Training Program: Intercultural Communication Course

A seafarer must be trained to demonstrate the ability to communicate effectively and to exchange information in carrying out his/her responsibilities. Relying on the modern educational theory, the maritime lecturer has to find the way to describe how intercultural communication should be taught.

In this paper we try to bring forth the importance of teaching intercultural communication skills to the seafarer who is to embark on a multilingual vessel, and to point out specific instruction and evaluation of communication skills as they relate to the seafarers responsibilities including good communication with his/her peers. We shall analyze all these by describing the **Intercultural Communication Course** for Romanian students- maritime officers in the future- implemented at Constanta Maritime University.

3.1. The Basic Parameters of the Intercultural Communication Course

To begin, we need to recognize the parameters within which we operate and to consider our particular situations. We also must decide on cultural elements that may be too sensitive to be discussed in class. These may include delicate matters such as male-female relationships, controversial political issues, and volatile subjects like alcohol, sexual orientation, and drugs. Topics that we often discuss in our own societies can create major problems when raised in classes. Consequently, we need to identify those sensitive topics and keep them in mind when designing our own course.

3.2. Course Part One: Home culture

Because it is not always clear exactly what ought to be covered in an Intercultural Communication Course, I will suggest topics and sequencing that have worked well for my course syllabus. Part one (14-hour units) begins with modules of instruction that allow students to explore their own cultures before venturing into unknown territories (Grove 1982). The first third of this course raises the participants' awareness that they are members of a particular culture. By exploring their own culture, students acquire the vocabulary to describe values, expectations, behaviors, traditions, customs, rituals, forms of greeting, cultural signs, and identity symbols familiar to them. Once students know how to talk about their culture, they are ready to discuss the values, expectations, and traditions of others with a higher degree of intellectual objectivity.

Unit no.1: Defining culture (2-hour classes)

We begin by defining what *culture* is. To do this we allow students to brainstorm freely but lead them to the ideas that culture is the total way of life of a group or society; that all humans living in groups have cultures; that there are no "inferior" or "superior" cultures; and that cultures are formed to meet human needs.

Unit no.2: Defining human needs (2-hour classes)

Once we have a definition of culture, we explore the concept of *human needs* in general. Abraham Malsow (1962) has suggested "*higher order*" and "*lower order*" needs that all cultures try to meet. Lower order needs are physical requirements such as food, water, and shelter; whereas formal education, self-development, self-fulfillment, and so forth, are higher order needs.

Once we have identified universal human needs, we discuss what needs are particular to the students' own culture. These might include security, religious requirements, or political imperatives unique to our students. The aim of the exercise is to instill in students the sense that they are members of a culture and that their way of life has evolved to meet particular needs.

Unit no.3: Behaviors (4-hour classes)

Having arrived at a characterization of culture and having explored human needs, we then relate needs and culture to *behaviors*. In one or two seminars, students become aware that behaviors are culturally prescribed norms intended to meet expectations or needs shared by

members of a culture. They learn, for instance, that certain social occasions demand specific behaviors and speech-acts.

For this module, we have chosen an exercise called "**What's Rude?**" in which participants identify rude and polite behaviors appropriate in their culture. We discuss what *to say* and *do* when calling on strangers, friends, elders, and social superiors. However, we only mention briefly how members of other cultures respond in similar situations. Here, the goal is for students to become aware that norms of behavior are culturally defined and varied. We feel that they need to learn the cultural codes of their society before they discover the codes of conduct of the target culture.

Unit no.4: Friendship (2-hour classes)

Next, we focus on *friendship* as a culturally defined concept. We discuss **how, when, where,** and **with whom** people typically become friends in their culture. Questions to explore might be what determine friendship; whether friendship is a practical matter, an emotional bond, or a relationship of mutual obligations; and if men and women can be friends. By brainstorming in groups, students begin to realize that there are patterns of expectations, prescribed behaviors, and obligations attached to social relationships, and that there is purpose and predictability to interpersonal relationships.

Unit no.5: Cultural symbols and rituals (4-hour classes)

For variety, we have included signs and symbols (identity symbols) of the culture. To teach this we use a *show-and-tell format* in which students explain meaningful objects, items particular to a culture such as a rice bowl, chop sticks, the national flag, or an animal/a flower used as a national symbol. Participants explain what objects represent or mean, and the rules, if any, for their uses. We then examine cultural rituals and any social values that produce such rituals. We explore the procedures, symbols, and prescribed behaviors of common events like weddings, rites of passage, festivals, and so forth. These are related to human needs and culturally defined values and expectations. The goal of this unit is to relate cultural behaviors to the things people value, expect, and commonly take for granted.

3.3. Course Part one: Methodology

The methodology used in the first part of the course is *student-centered*: students hypothesize, brainstorm, discuss, conclude, and inform the teacher/instructor of their findings. In other words, the students teach the teacher. This approach makes sense, especially when the teacher/instructor finds himself or herself in a multicultural classroom/group of students. The benefits of this approach are a high degree of student motivation, a great amount of oral language practice, and student-generated learning. Students work in groups of threes or fours on everything. Then they have to perform their show-and-tell presentations. At the end of this part of the course, participants are graded on group/class participation, on the quality of their presentations, and on a terminal quiz on concepts taught in this part of the course.

3.4. Course Part Two: Target culture

Till here, we have focused on the students' culture. Our intention has been to raise the students' awareness of their own way of life, to acquaint them with some basic cultural concepts,

to give them vocabulary with which to talk about culture, and to cultivate a degree of intellectual objectivity essential in cross-cultural analyses. Our next objective is more challenging: to create an awareness of the building blocks of our particular worldviews in relation to other worldviews. Our purpose is to foster a certain degree of understanding of the target culture from an insider's perspective—an empathetic view that permits the student to accurately interpret foreign cultural behaviors.

We cover nonverbal communication, cultural assumptions, values, expectations, stereotypes, and cultural adjustment or culture shock (Paige 1993). In a 14-hour component, we emphasize how those elements of our worldview can become roadblocks to intercultural understanding and how they can undermine the formation of an intelligent perspective of a foreign culture. We discuss and analyze critical incidents to see how our worldviews occasionally collide and leave people perplexed and offended (Storti 1994).

Unit no.1: Basic reality assumptions (2-hour classes)

Also in the second part of the course, we teach the most challenging concept—“*basic reality assumptions*”. In this module, course participants try to define which values or ideas are behind our values, perspectives, attitudes, and consequently our expectations and behaviors. We explore what our students, in their culture, assume to be true about the world and the way things work, and we compare and contrast these with Romanian assumptions about reality. Basic premises about time, progress, the purpose of life, human nature, God, the invisible world, and many other things may be similar or remarkably different from culture to culture.

The aim of our discussions is to recognize some basic perspectives that underlie our interpretations of the world and to acknowledge that such assumptions can differ. What we hope emerges from our discussions is that, contrary to what we have been taught, truths or assumptions are not necessarily universal. What is real or true to one group may not be real or true for Romanians, for example. Recognizing that there are essential differences in worldviews permits students to respond more effectively when cross-cultural communication breaks down, as it most certainly can (Stewart and Bennett 1991).

Unit no.2: Cultural values (2-hour classes)

Next we center on things, qualities, or abstract ideas that a culture considers valuable. We explore the students' cultural values and compare and contrast them with mainstream Romanian values. We do this by examining such popular Romanian proverbs and sayings as “*He who steals an egg today, will steal an ox tomorrow*”, “*Every bird dies by its own tongue*”, “*Water flows, but rocks remain*”, “*There's no smoke without fire*” since cultural values are embedded in sayings. As many cultures have similar sayings that transmit attitudes and values, you will find students eager to compare such memorable maxims. The point, however, is to note the cultural values that are associated with the sayings and proverbs.

In keeping to our goal of raising student awareness of cultural values, we examine the qualities that we admire in our heroes. These, like other determiners, are culturally defined even though they may be universally shared. Values such as perseverance, innovativeness, individualism, cooperation, self-motivation, loyalty, friendship, public service, and piety may be exemplified through biographies of famous men and women who have contributed to a society. We discuss the biographies of Romanian heroes from all ethnic backgrounds who embody values shared by Romanians. What emerges from this exercise is an awareness of the values of the target culture and the degree to which we share such values.

Unit no.3: Human cognition (2-hour classes)

To prepare for our discussion on stereotyping, we have a module on *human cognition*. The mind tends to jump to conclusions and acts on them based upon a minimal amount of sensory input (Summerfield 1993). Before all the data are known, we have already attributed meaning to our impressions and find ourselves acting on these, often to learn that we have been mistaken. To demonstrate that we see what we expect to see out of habit rather than what is actually there, we show photographs, for example, of street scenes, and elicit various interpretations which reflect what individuals assume is happening. Such demonstrations illustrate that our perceptions can be erroneous and that we are culturally conditioned to expect things to be a certain way. This lesson prepares our students for the module on stereotyping.

Unit no.4: Stereotyping (2-hour classes)

Stereotypes are gross simplifications that neatly sum up members of other groups or cultures. Such impressions prevent a more profound understanding of who others are as individuals and as members of social groups. Stereotypes are probably the most difficult stumbling block to overcome for any person in a foreign environment, and as such, the topic requires considerable attention in **Intercultural Communication** Courses.

First, students need to learn what stereotypes are and how they interfere with communication. Students discuss common impressions they have of various nationals and then are asked where these impressions come from (their cultural background, or practice on board ship within multilingual crew etc). The next step is to find out whether students have any firsthand knowledge of foreign nationals and whether foreigners really have these characteristics. It becomes apparent that while there may be a kernel of truth to stereotypes, they do not adequately represent individuals. Students then learn that stereotyping prevents our dealing effectively with members of other societies.

For discussion sessions, we use films and other visual media showing members of the target culture. By becoming aware of their preconceptions about the target culture, students will be able to overcome stereotypes.

Unit no.5: Culture shock (2-hour classes)

We also have a module on culture shock and adjusting to a foreign environment of life/work on board ship. Students seldom know what to expect when they join a multilingual crew. In order to prepare them for this experience and to teach some coping skills, our course includes also the video entitled *Cold Water* by Noriko Ogami (1988), which we show in manageable segments. We ask students to identify stereotypical impressions of Americans. Then we examine common patterns of cultural adjustment—the emotional patterns of highs and lows that students would have to deal with while abroad (Weaver 1993).

Unit no.6: Cross-cultural communication (4-hour classes)

Finally, in the latter part of the course, students learn to analyze incidents that involve cross-cultural misunderstandings—conflicts of values and expectations. Teachers/ instructors write scripts about common interpersonal occurrences in which characters from different cultures have divergent interpretations of what is said or done. Students must identify the communication problem in the incident, determine the values involved, and correct the misunderstanding. The

objective is to teach participants to analyze misunderstandings in cultural terms and to help them learn to deal effectively with similar situations.

3.5. **Pedagogical approach**

The focus in the second part of the course is the free exchange of interpretations and ideas. While the teacher/instructor may be the authority on the target culture, he or she cannot possibly anticipate all difficulties students encounter in comprehending another culture. Hence, student-centered talk and student-centered activities are particularly important. As in the first part of the course, students need constant reminders that the cultural concepts they are learning have practical relevance to their ultimate goal—cultural adjustment and a successful experience abroad while they are on board ship. Although teachers may vary the types of exercises they use and substitute the cultural topics discussed, we advise contrasting cultural values in the latter part of the program when students are more knowledgeable and have a greater degree of objectivity.

4. **Conclusion**

By custom designing their own Intercultural Communication Course, teachers can meet the particular needs of their students. However, it is important to follow the recommended sequencing of topics, beginning with an exploration of the home culture before contrasting values, expectations, and behaviors of the target culture. Once we are aware of how culture determines our lifestyles and behaviors, we are all in a better position to reach across our many borders.

It is essential for seafarers of all nationalities to be capable of communicating appropriately and effectively, appreciating cultural variation, and resolving conflicting views from the basis of a perspective broader than any single particular worldview. In addition to acquiring proficiency in language, it helps seafarers to move away from cultural rigidity and ethnocentrism, and lean towards greater openness and understanding of fundamental socio-cultural norms of other human beings. The more seafarers can understand each other, the more likely they are to run not just an efficient and safe ship, but a ship on which personal and working relationships can be built up.

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