

RAISING STUDENTS' INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS AND PREPARING THEM FOR INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS (COMMUNICATION) BY E-MAIL

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IN THIS ARTICLE, we report on an assignment in which we try to raise our students' intercultural awareness. The assignment, an intercultural e-mail project, was developed during the past 2 academic years for the course Introduction to Intercultural Communication for 1st-year students of Business Communication of the Radboud University (Nijmegen, the Netherlands) and for 2nd-year students of the Lessius Hogeschool (Flanders, Belgium) (cf. Planken, Hooft, & Korzilius, 2004). In this article, we describe the project, give reasons for its format, and evaluate it from the point of view of both the students who took part in it and the teachers who gave the course.

AIMS AND CULTURES

The purpose of our intercultural e-mail project is to allow our students to experience cultural differences, talk about cultural differences, and learn to cooperate with someone from a different culture. To meet these aims, we "couple" two students who come from different cultures but have the same mother tongue. We think it is very important that

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both students can communicate in their own language, because having to communicate in a second language or in a lingua franca (English) could lead to communication breakdowns.

To find two different cultures in which Dutch is spoken seems more difficult than to find different cultures in which English, French, Spanish, or Portuguese is spoken. However, we found two of these cultures, namely, Flanders and the Netherlands. Flanders is the northern part of Belgium, the part where Dutch is the official language. Flanders and the Netherlands are “neighbors,” and at one time they formed the Low Lands. Due to political activities from the Spaniards, the Flemish were separated from the Dutch in the 1585 Fall of Antwerp. As a result, the rich, important cultural or intellectual Flemish fled to the north and brought Amsterdam—amongst other cities—to its “Golden Age.” Flanders was Catholic, poor, and under the domination of a French-speaking upper class; the Netherlands grew into a Protestant, rich, and entrepreneurial state, well known across the world in North America, Southeast Asia, and so on.

The separation of Flanders and the Netherlands has had a profound impact on the cultural differences to be detected in both regions. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Geert Hofstede did his research into cultural values and organizational situations. On the basis of his study, he concluded, “In fact, no two countries . . . with a common border and a common language are so far culturally apart . . . as (Dutch) Belgium and the Netherlands” (Hofstede, 1980, p. 228; 2001, p. 63). Research by Claes and Gerritsen (2002) indicates that there are more differences than the ones pointed out by Hofstede. Apart from differences in power distance, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance, there are also differences in polychrony versus monochrony, particularism versus universalism, emotional versus neutral, and diffuse versus specific traits. Moreover, there are differences in attitudes toward context, personal space, territory, and orientation to the past.

In short, in a project in which one aims at having students experience cultural differences and learn to communicate with someone from a different culture in their own mother tongue, Flanders and the Netherlands are very good candidates.

CHANNEL: E-MAIL

We know that Poncini (2004) argued that there is a clear relation between “face-to-face communication and socializing processes in

Table 1. Questionnaire Topics

Rituals	National holidays; special events such as birth, birthday, and burial; the use of time; (business) meetings; application letters
Symbols	Clothing, language used
Values	Masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, space, particularism/universalism, (in)formality, power distance

international businesses” and “that richness of channel is important (i.e., face-to-face communication is richer than telephone communication, in turn richer than written communication)” (p. 44). Nevertheless, we decided to carry out our project with a poor communication channel—e-mail—because this way our students could get a maximum of experience with a minimum loss of time and money. Moreover, we did not attempt to “change” the deeply ingrained values and attitudes that our students have been living by since “birth” as part of a socialization process.

QUESTIONNAIRE

We developed a questionnaire with 18 topics divided into three overarching topics: symbols, rituals, and values. Table 1 gives an idea of the topics dealt with. For many of those topics, we knew in advance that there were differences between the Netherlands and Flanders.

An example of a “ritual” question is the following:

Enumerate all official holidays of your country in 2004. Start with January 1 and end with December 31. Put the dates of the holidays and their names for it under each other. Write behind all dates

1. what is being celebrated
2. how you celebrate this in your family
3. how this is celebrated in public

One might expect people (all over the world, but especially in Western Europe) to celebrate the New Year in the same way, but nothing is less true. In the Netherlands, one fries *oliebollen* (lardy cakes) and everyone gets one for free—on the streets; in Flanders, the nuclear family (parents, children and their partners, grandchildren) comes together to have an extensive meal (three to five courses) with white and red wine, coffee, brandy, and so on.

Besides that, Belgium has two official holidays more than the Netherlands and the dates for many holidays are different—as one might expect because of the differences in religion and history.

An example of a “symbol” question is the following:

Imagine that you applied for the job of communication manager at a large bank and you have been invited for an interview.

- a. Describe in detail what you would wear.
- b. Describe in detail what you believe someone of the opposite sex should wear.

Due to the fact that the power distance in the Flemish culture is much higher than in the Dutch culture (see Hofstede, 1980, p. 230; 2001, pp. 500-501), most Flemish students can be expected to dress themselves far more formally than Dutch students. Flemish men often wear a suit; Flemish women, a woman's suit. The Dutch—both sexes—wear a tidy pair of pants, a sweater, and a shirt or blouse.

An example of a “value” question is the following:

This is a list with eight requirements that you could expect from a job. Label what you think is most important as “1,” the next most important as “2,” and so on. Label the least important requirement as “8.”

- a. Have good promotion prospects
- b. Have responsibilities
- c. Be able to show creativity
- d. Know exactly what tasks you have to fulfill
- e. Have a permanent contract
- f. Have flextime
- g. Have a nice workplace
- h. Have good relationships with boss and colleagues

Because masculinity and uncertainty avoidance are higher in Flanders than in the Netherlands (Hofstede 1980, p. 230; 2001, pp. 500-501) Flemish and Dutch students often differ in the job requirements that they see as most important. The Dutch often place c, f, g, and h at the top of their list, whereas the Flemish give priority to a, b, d, and e.

THREE PHASES

The project has a straightforward development: There are three phases. In Phase 1, students in Antwerp and Nijmegen fill in the

questionnaire individually. When students have filled in their questionnaire, they send the document by e-mail to the student they have been matched with.

In Phase 2, each of the students scrutinizes the questionnaire he or she received to look for differences and similarities. If the student finds differences, he or she has to communicate with the other student by e-mail or MSN about the reasons for these differences: Are they personal or are they culturally bound? If the differences can be categorized and labeled using the theoretical foundations—for example, Hall (1959, 1976), Hofstede (2001), and Trompenaars (1993)—and scientific research (especially by Dutch students under supervision of Gerritsen) described in Claes and Gerritsen (2002), then they are culturally bound; if not, they are personal.

In Phase 3, the Dutch and Flemish students write a report together on the differences and analogies and the explanations they have for this situation on the basis of the literature dealt with in the courses and the textbook. In the case of cultural differences, they have to give an example of a communication breakdown that could result from those differences. The report—with the entire e-mail/MSN correspondence and filled-in questionnaire—is handed in at the end of the project. The whole project takes 7 weeks.

PROBLEMS

Projects are not without organizational problems, and intercultural e-mail projects are prone to more problems than one might expect. The first major problem is encountered when students are matched to each other. Everything is fine until one member of a team opts out and stops its study. The second problem is the apparent difference between the Dutch and the Flemish educational programs. Though the Bologna treaty should align all educational programs for higher education in the European Union, it is obvious that the regions and countries that signed the treaty still go on with their former systems, only under a different name (bachelor/master). So the Dutch university system still starts its academic year on September 1, whereas the Flemish start the last Monday of September. One of the reasons that the project takes only 7 weeks is because this is the time slot that both institutions run parallel to each other. Or, to take another example, the Dutch have a grading system that goes from 0 to 10, with 5.6 as a turning point between “pass” or “fail”; whereas the Flemish give grades from 0 to 20, with 10 indicating the pass/fail boundary.

EVALUATION

Though Dutch and Flemish people “speak the same language,” they have a different cultural background. Students do not always know this, but the project confronts them in a subtle way with some of the major differences that one might come across when dealing (for business or pleasure) with people from the neighboring country. This is not simply a question of superficial indications; it goes deep into the value-laden underground of one’s existence: something one sees only when confronted with it “on paper.” One example to illustrate this basic experience is given here.

First contact message—Dutch student to Flemish student:

Hey!
Nou bij deze mijn vragenlijst!
K hoop die van jou ook snel te mogen ontvangen.
Doeidoei xxx Esmee
 [translation:
Hi!
Here comes my questionnaire! I hope to receive yours [-polite] quickly too.
Bye-bye xxx Esmee]

First contact message—Flemish student to Dutch student:

Goeiemorgen!
Hier is ook mijn vragenlijst. Ik heb uw vragenlijst bekeken en zag er goed uit. Ik zal beginnen met het vergelijken van onze antwoorden en deze uitwerken aan de hand van het stramien.
Groetjes Joris
 [translation:
Good morning!
Here is my questionnaire too. I have looked at your [+polite] questionnaire and it looked good. I'll start to compare our answers and develop this by means of the frame.
Regards Joris]

Readers knowledgeable in French, German, Spanish, Italian, or Dutch know that in these languages there is a difference in formality in the second person pronoun (*you*) between *jij/tu/du/tú/tu* and *u/vous/sie/usted/Lei*. The first form of the second person pronoun is used for subordinates, children, or peers and is informal; the second form is used for strangers, superiors, and parents and is formal (Brown & Gilman, 1960/1972). In the original message, the Dutch student uses the *jij* form (informal), even though she is addressing a complete stranger. In contrast, the Flemish student uses the *u* form (formal), which might be expected because he is addressing a stranger; but knowing that his addressee is a peer-student (even

Table 2. Advantages and Disadvantages of the E-Mail Project

<i>Advantages</i>	<i>Disadvantages</i>
Experiential nature of the project	Experiential nature of the project
Use of electronics as a communication channel	Use of electronics as a communication channel
Addition to "theoretical knowledge" about cultural differences	

though he does not know her), one might expect an informal personal pronoun. One might conclude that the Dutch student is less formal and this is in line with the finding that the Dutch—in Hofstede's 1970s research—were found to have a lower power-distance index than the Flemish.

However, the differences found by our students were not always in line with the results of former research. For instance, not all the pairs differed in aspects that were related to masculinity. Though the Flemish are more masculine than the Dutch (according to Hofstede, 2001, pp. 500-501), students found out that a lot of Flemish rated a nice workplace and having good relationships with boss and colleagues as very important in a job. These results made students face the fact that theories are limited, that individual variation exists in cultures, and that cultures can change. Because they were confronted with the fact that cultures in which the same mother tongue is spoken can differ enormously from each other, they gradually realized that countries and regions that have the same mother tongue (e.g., Canada, United States, Great Britain, and Australia; or Germany, North Switzerland, and Austria) need not necessarily share the same cultural background (see Graves, 1997).

An e-mail project such as this has advantages for the students and disadvantages. They are summed up in Table 2.

The first and second advantages are also disadvantages, if Murphy's Law is at play. Because the project is about experiencing "intercultural differences," the experience is the culmination point of the input of the participants. Some students might get lucky; others might not. For instance, depending on the background of the students, one might get very striking differences or similarities. Moreover, the electronic channel is—at its best—quick, cheap, and present everywhere; but students not staying at home—as most Dutch students do—may be deprived of a private access to the channel and have to rely on the

resources of the university. Besides that, every breakdown of the server is a project-threatening situation. The third advantage has no negative side effects. The actual experiencing of intercultural differences in a “structured” way is something that no book or lecture can hope to achieve.

For the teachers, the project was quite a job during the 1st (trial) year, but during the 2nd year, the preparation and actual coaching of the project took less time. One of the reasons for this different situation was that we organized the project in a stricter way during the 2nd year. For instance, students had to contact us within the 1st week of the project if their matched student did not respond or react, or when the cooperation did not really run smoothly. The students also received guidelines for the final report that were more comprehensive and strict. Students were told week after week that they had to write the final report as a team and were responsible for the success of their team effort. All deadlines—up to the hour—were the same for all students in Nijmegen and Antwerp.

All in all, the project is worth all the effort the teacher has to put in to make it work, because it is also a gold mine of data for research into cultural differences and intercultural communication, both from a more general (sociopsychological) and more specific (linguistic) point of view.

The participating students evaluated the project after handing in their report. A sampling of reactions is presented here:

At first sight, differences didn't seem that big, but when we discussed things they seemed very big.

We learned how it is to cooperate with people from a different culture. You have to adapt and look for compromises.

We learned a lot about cultural differences by jointly writing the report, but also by discussing things. The project has to stay. It is good to learn to cooperate and adapt in such circumstances.

As the students themselves suggested, this project should remain part of their higher education curriculum to prepare them for the actual intercultural (business) encounters that they can expect in a unified European Community. Intercultural contact does not automatically lead to intercultural learning and to the development of positive attitudes toward the other culture (O'Dowd, 2003), but we believe that in this intercultural e-mail project we succeeded fairly well in reaching these ends. Through this project, students experi-

enced cultural differences and learned to talk about these differences and to cooperate with someone from another culture. *En passant*, they developed a critical reaction to existing theories about cultural differences. Students liked the assignment through which the aims were met, as the following quotation from a last e-mail contact of a Dutch student illustrates:

Onderwerp: goodbye, goodbye, snik, snik

*Ha Stijn,
Je bent een toffe vent om mee te werken . . . Ik denk dat we goed hebben samengewerkt en dat we een mooi project hebben gemaakt . . .
Heel veel dank voor de laatste veranderingen! . . .
Je bent een gek type, maar wel eentje waar je lol mee kunt hebben . . .
We houden contact voor het eindcijfer, want dat is het echte goodbye moment . . .
als we in de stress zitten over het eindresultaat dan mailen we . . .
Komt vast wel goed.*

[translation:

Subject: saying farewell, weep, weep,

*Hi Stijn!
You're a nice fellow to work with! . . . I think we worked together well, and that our project was a fine piece of work . . .
Thanks very much for the ultimate changes! . . .
You're a crazy type, but one to have lots of fun with . . .
We keep contact for the evaluation scores. Because that is a real moment of farewell . . . when we are in (di)stress about our final result then we will mail each other . . .
Will turn out all right.]*

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