Elements of Intercultural Communication

For the complete video with media resources, visit: http://www.nationalgeographic.org/media/dialogue/

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The relations between the United States and China are often described as complex and multi-faceted, as the two countries are competitors in some areas and partners in others. The variety of cultural differences between Eastern and Western cultures adds additionally to the fascinating task and imperative need to explore intercultural communication skills in the context of U.S.-China relations. These video clips from the sixty-six minute documentary The Dialogue provide a glimpse into the barriers that make cross-cultural communication difficult and often non-productive. They also highlight skills of open, honest communication that help break down those barriers.

The Dialogue, created by Crossing Borders Films and co-produced by Michigan State University, follows four American and four Chinese university students as they travel together through Hong Kong and Southwest China. In these clips, we see these students practice skills of cross-cultural communication. Their honest confrontations and discoveries about one another become doorways to deepen their understanding of the world, of themselves, and of styles of communication that are able to bridge cultural differences.
Clip Summaries:

“Challenges of Communicating Across Differences”: The students talk openly about how their different communication styles, personalities, and cultural backgrounds create barriers to communication and understanding. They discuss the insights that facilitate dialogue even when these barriers and tensions exist.

“On Speaking a Second Language”: The students take turns speaking in their own languages in order to experience the power and security that comes when one is comfortable in the language that is spoken. They come to recognize how language insecurity impacts communication.

“On Non-Verbal Communication”: The students discuss the power of non-verbal communication. They gain insight into how people employ different types of non-verbal communication to express themselves and interact with others—and how these types of non-verbal communication may differ from one culture to another.

Questions

- In “Challenges of Communicating Across Differences,” what differences in communication styles did the students experience, and how did they view their differences afterwards?

  Han felt OiYan’s communication style was not polite enough and was too critical. OiYan had adopted a more direct and frank way of communicating in America. After they discussed these differences, OiYan said that she views misunderstandings as natural when there are cultural and personal differences. Han said that it might be better to deal with tensions openly, because one can only change a problem when one realizes it exists.

- In “On Non-Verbal Communication,” how did the students differentiate between communication and language?

  They identified a variety of non-verbal techniques—hand motions, facial
expressions, and tones of voice—that communicate attitudes, feelings, values, and judgments in their cultures and communities.

- Why did Ana, the facilitator in “On Speaking a Second Language,” ask the students to “swap,” or change, languages to Chinese in the conversation? What was the outcome for the students?

Ana wanted the American students to realize the power and comfort that comes with it when one is secure in the language that is spoken. Swapping languages showed the American students their advantage in using English.

Fast Facts

- An Emory University psychologist has developed a set of tests to access subtle cues to emotional expressions. This test is called the Diagnostic Analysis of Non-verbal Accuracy (DANVA). According to DANVA, non-verbal communication skill is associated with personal and social adjustment, and the ability to read non-verbal emotions can be improved.

- We listen to people at a rate of 125-250 words per minute, but think at 1,000-3,000 words per minute. Less than 2 percent of people have had any formal education on how to listen. We derive 55 percent of a message's meaning from the speaker's facial expressions, 38 percent from how he or she says the message, and 7 percent from the actual words spoken.

- Non-verbal communication studies show that children tend to learn to read a happy expression first, followed by sad, angry, and then fearful expressions.

- The world's most widely spoken languages by number of native speakers and as a second language, according to figures from The United Nations’ Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), are: Mandarin Chinese, English, Spanish, Hindi, Arabic, Bengali, Russian, Portuguese, Japanese, German, and French.

- China is the world’s most populous country with 1.39 billion people in 2013,
one-fifth of the world’s total. This figure does not include the 31 million Chinese people living in the Hong Kong and Macao special administrative regions and the Taiwan Province.

Articles & Profiles

- Conflict Resolution Skills
- How Do Culturally Different People Interpret Nonverbal Communication?

Websites

- China Demographics Profile 2013
- Timeline: U.S. Relations with China
- Michigan State University: International Studies and Programs: Crossing Borders Education

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