Intercultural Communication and Service-Learning: An exploration and examination of communication education, intercultural communication theory, and service-learning in the development of curriculum for the postsecondary classroom.

Carolyn M. Hudman

Gonzaga University
Intercultural Communication and Service-Learning

Years ago, while thumbing through a science textbook I came across an image of the earth. It is an image that many scholars have seen – the earth as a small blue marble nestled in a blanket and black. It is an image that serves as a reminder of how small and fragile the earth is. It also serves as a reminder of how connected the earth’s population truly is despite geographical boarders. For generations man’s image of the earth was much different. It was ethnocentric view that simply experienced the “world” through our immediate interaction with those of shared culture. It was a world in which geographical boarders often served as cultural boundaries.

Though geographical borders may remain, the cultural boundaries are eroding as people log on to the Internet, watch global mass media, chat with a friend around the world, or simply buy a product or service provided by another country. A new global community is emerging. It is a community filled with diversity in culture. And with this flow of people, products and information “lives…are shaped, sometimes unexpectedly, through contact with linguistic and cultural others who they would once not have encountered” (Dooley, 2009, p. 498). Though new communication technologies have served to unite us as people, without effective intercultural communication skills and knowledge these technologies can serve to divide us as people as well.

New technologies introduce new challenges, making it imperative for every culture to expand their cultural awareness and to learn to interact with their global neighbors. Therefore the study of intercultural communication is of critical importance in the postsecondary classroom. In this project I will explore educational theory and its application in communication education and a variety of intercultural communication theories. I will then strategize and develop an intercultural communication curriculum for the postsecondary classroom that introduces a
service learning component to the educational process. I feel that through service learning students will have the opportunity to gain a unique perspective and develop a deeper understanding of the power of effective intercultural communication. While I am just beginning to explore educational theory, I have had the opportunity to study Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Parker Palmer’s subject-centered pedagogy and have found elements of both that I would like to glean and incorporate in my teaching. I like Freire’s ability to empower the student through dialogue. Both Freire and Palmer value the student’s participation in the educational process and ask that the student’s take an active role in learning. According to Parker Palmer (1990),

> Good teaching requires courage—the courage to expose one’s ignorance as well as insight, to invite contradiction as well as consent, to yield some control in order to empower the group, to evoke other people’s lives as well as reveal one’s own. (p.16)

At this time I am not confident enough with what I have read to be able to select a specific educational theory and may need to blend theory and techniques from multiple theories. I do know that because of the diverse domestic population it is important that while reviewing educational theory that I understand and incorporate different learning styles as well as communication styles into my teaching technique (Bennet & Salonene, 2007). “While culture is often addressed in the content of the curriculum, it is less frequently incorporated into the process of teaching and learning” (Bennett & Salonen, p. 46). In order help students develop this deeper understanding I will recognize and build upon the diversity within the classroom and incorporate culture into the educational process. The opportunity for intercultural communication is often right in front of us. If we are willing to learn about and build upon the strengths of the diverse cultures, both dominant and non-dominant, that exist in our own learning communities
we can create a rich and rewarding educational experience. “We will never understand racism, class, social justice, international development, or the person sitting next to us without quietly listening to the stories of those who experience the world in different ways” (Bennett & Salonen, 2007, p. 46). I would like to ensure that I allow students to take an active role in the learning process by engaging them in intercultural experiences throughout the course both within the classroom and outside of the classroom in the form of a service learning component to the curriculum.

Universities across the United States are recognizing the value of intercultural competencies as a beneficial component to academia and have increased their commitment to “teaching diversity and multiculturalism” (Platt, 2002, p. 41). “With global citizenship and civic engagement as core missions in higher education, intercultural competence becomes central across disciplines” (Bennett & Salonen, 2007, p. 50). The field of intercultural communication provides a particularly useful perspective for developing intercultural competence: “It aims to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for effective and appropriate interactions across cultures” (Bennet & Salonen, 2007, p. 48). Developing these skill sets and building a knowledge base through intercultural communication education places students in an advantageous position when they graduate to the global marketplace. Not only will they be able to effectively communicate with diverse cultures and navigate cultural codes and cues that exist beyond the simple translation of language, they can use the skills they learn to unite people and to build upon the collective knowledge of multiple cultures.

In order to gain the knowledge and the skill sets needed to effectively navigate differences in cultures both on the domestically and globally, students must gain a comprehensive understanding of culture as a whole and how cultural influences (and may
inhibit) the communicative process. Culture is a complex social construct which can be difficult to define because it encompasses every aspect of an individual’s life and their perception of their world (Keshishian, 2005; Eagleton, 2000). Every person has a “multi-layered cultural identity” (Distelhorst, 2007, p. 8) which includes their nationality, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic class, education level, religion, and many other identifiers (Distelhorst, 2007). Gerry Philipsen, University of Washington professor of communication and specialist in intercultural communication “describes culture as a socially constructed and historically transmitted pattern of symbols, meanings, premises, and rules” (Griffin, 2009, p. 384). Culture is “a process, rather than a ready-made, static entity…culture is going to emerge through interaction” (Wolf, Milburn, & Wilkins, 2008, p. 174).

In my research, I will research and review popular intercultural communication textbooks used to guide curriculum for the postsecondary classroom. Keshishian (2005) offered a strategy in which to find the most popular intercultural communication textbooks by contacting the “four major publishing companies (Wadsworth/Thomson, McGraw-Hill, Allyn and Bacon/Longman, and Houghton Mifflin) for a list of the five most popular/best selling undergraduate intercultural textbooks in the United States” (p. 210).

I will also explore a number of intercultural communication theories that offer students a lens in which to examine and interpret culture. I will develop a comprehensive understanding of major theories associated with intercultural communication: Howard Giles’ Communication Accommodation Theory; Stella Ting-Toomey’s Face-Negotiation Theory; and Gerry Philipsen’s Speech Codes Theory. The study of these theories will allow students to gain strategies toward intercultural communication competence or “the ability of a member of a given community to use language in a socially appropriate manner” (Wolf, Milburn, & Wilkins, 2008, p. 172).
The goal of the project is to develop a curriculum that engages students and increases their knowledge of how to effectively communicate in the intercultural communication process and to develop skill sets that would enhance their intercultural competencies making today’s students, the global leaders of tomorrow.
References


Literature Review


Definition of Terms & Great Quote

Social Class: “The word ‘class’ comes from the Roman classis, a system used to divide the population into groups for taxation purposes. Since Roman days, class consistently has been based on social stratification, the ranking of groups according to various criteria, with ascending positions afforded more value, respect, status, and privilege than lower positions. Placement in a class system can occur through ascription, based on conditions at birth such as family background, race, sex, or place of birth, or achievement, as a result of individual effort or merit such as earning a college degree.” (Allen, 2004, p. 97)

“A central assumption to the American dream is that, with hard work and persistence, individuals can improve their class standing, even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary,” (Martin, J. N. & Nakayama, T. K., 2004, p. 164).

“In the myth of the classless society, ambition and intelligence alone are responsible for success. The myth conceals the existence of a class society, which serves many functions. One of the main ways it keeps the working-class and poor locked into a class-based system in a position of servitude is by cruelly creating false hope … that they can have different opportunities in life.” (Lanston, 1995, p. 101).

“One difficulty in talking about class is that the word means different things to different people. Class is rank, it is tribe, it is culture and taste. It is attitudes and assumptions, a source of identity, a system of exclusion. To some it is just money,” (Correspondents of the New York Times, 2005, p. 8).

“Classes are groups of people of similar economic and social position; people who for that reason, may share political attitudes, lifestyles, consumption patterns, cultural interests, and opportunities to get ahead,” (Correspondents of the New York Times, 2005, p. 8).


Social stratification: “a system by which a society ranks categories of people in a hierarchy” (Macionis, 2004, p. 188).

Lower Class:

Working Class:
Middle Class:

Upper Class: