What Is Intercultural Communication?

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You might have already heard of the term “intercultural communication” many times before taking this course. Most of you have an intuitive understanding that it refers to communication between people with different cultural backgrounds. This is correct, but not enough. There are three important elements that mark a communication act as intercultural. They are:

- contact (communication)
- between different cultures (inter-), and
- the cultural differences should make a difference in the process

It does not matter whether the contacts are face to face or through a medium (e.g., letter, email, online games, social media, etc.), but there must be some kind of interactions taking place. We are lucky to live in this era with fast developing information and communication technology (ICT). These ICTs afford communication on multiple platforms and allow for easy mobility across cultures that is not bounded by geographical locations.

Secondly, there must be cultural differences between people who are in contact. Here cultural differences can be categorized by nationality, ethnicity, religious belief, gender, age/generation, geographical region, political ideology, body (dis)ability, sexual orientation, etc. None of us belong to only one type of cultural groups, so it is natural that several of these categories might apply in one interaction. In certain contexts, one or more of the cultural categories would be salient or singled out in comparison with others. None of the categories would define us all the time. For example, a female engineer might be culturally more similar to a male engineer at work, but quite different in their socializing behavior. A Buddhist from India and a Buddhist from China might share more cultures than their apparent differences in nationality or language.

This leads to the third element listed above that the cultural difference (no matter which category it is) must make a difference in the communication. The mere existence of cultural differences is the prerequisite for intercultural communication, but it does not necessarily the marker of it. The cultural differences have to make a difference in the interaction to qualify the process as intercultural communication. Going back to the engineer’s example, we could say that the technical talks between the two engineers are not so much affected by their genders, thus are considered as not so much intercultural. Similarly, the two Buddhists could be interacting interculturally if their understanding of the same Buddhist classics or teaching is different due to translation variations.
To summarize, you might characterize each communication interaction as being more or less intercultural if you could identify whether there is cultural difference and how it makes a difference. There is no magic line to draw to isolate “intercultural” from other types of communication. Although in practices, we often equate cultural differences to groups divided by nationality, ethnicity, or race, it is important that you keep in mind a broader understanding of cultures that each of us embody.

In the end, we would like to provide you with several commonly accepted academic definitions and references so that you can look into each later and read further:

- Intercultural communication refers to the communication between people from two different cultures. (Chen & Starosta, 1998:28)
- Intercultural communication is a symbolic, interpretive, transactional, contextual process in which people from different cultures create shared meanings. (Lustig & Koester, 2007:46)
- Hence one way of viewing intercultural communication is as communication that unfolds in symbolic intercultural spaces. These are moments when a communication exchange has been affected by cultural differences. (Arasaratnam, 2013: 48)

References


This article has been developed especially for this online course.

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