

Communicating Across Cultures
Spring Semester 2003

Two sessions / week
1.5 hours / session

Course Description

It has become commonplace knowledge that globalization is one of the major forces shaping our world. If we look at the spread of information, ideas, capital, media, cultural artifacts—or for that matter, people—we can see the boundaries and borders that have historically separated one country or one group from another are becoming more and more permeable. For proof of this close to home, you need only to look at the composition of the MIT student body: Eight percent of the undergraduates and 37 percent of the graduate students are from 109 different countries.

"Communicating Across Cultures" is designed to help you meet the challenges of living in a world in which, increasingly, you will be asked to interact with people who may not be like you in fundamental ways. Its primary goals are to help you become more sensitive to intercultural communication differences, and to provide you with the knowledge and skills that will help you interact successfully with people from cultures other than your own. We hope the course will accomplish those goals by exposing you to some of the best writers and scholars on the subject of intercultural communication, and by giving you a variety of opportunities to practice intercultural communication yourself. As you read this syllabus, we hope you get a sense of our commitment to making this course a rewarding experience for you.

Course Goals

There are seven objectives we hope to accomplish during the semester. They are:

1. *Understand the role of communication in culture.* Although coming from different perspectives, philosophers, anthropologists, sociolinguistics, and communication experts have all examined the role of communication in creating and maintaining culture. We will begin the course by looking at this fundamental connection between culture and communication.
2. *Recognize cultural variables.* Every culture is confronted with a series of questions it tries to answer in a variety of ways. (Some examples of these questions include: Is change positive or negative? What is the nature of authority? Is doing important or is being important?) Since obviously we will not be able to study every culture, we will develop ways of thinking about and identifying cultural variables that appear through communication. The goal is to give you a framework that will enable you to analyze and understand the cultures with which you will have contact.

3. *Familiarize yourself with the norms, rituals, and taboos of other cultures.* Through a series of case studies in the second half of the course, you will have the opportunity to learn about the specific communication practices that exist in five countries. If some members of the class are from those countries, we hope they will become “informants” to add to our knowledge.
4. *Learn about barriers to intercultural communication, adjustment to other cultures, and culture shock.* We will work to identify those communication behaviors that can interfere with effective intercultural communication. We will also discuss the stages people go through as they adjust to other cultures, and ways to minimize culture shock.
5. *Practice performing communication activities as they would be done in other cultures.* After exploring how speaking, listening, and communicating nonverbally differ from culture to culture, we will go on to look at how persuading, motivating, constructing an argument, problem solving, decision making, negotiating, and resolving conflicts also vary. In-class exercises will give you the chance to practice these kinds of communication skills as they are performed in other countries.
6. *Understand how differences in intercultural communication manifest themselves in different settings.* Through presentations and reports you will create in intercultural teams, you will look more closely at the role intercultural communication plays in business, education, health care, diplomacy, the arts, etc.
7. *Increase sensitivity to your own cultural background and its impact on how you communicate, increase knowledge of ethical issues in communicating interculturally, and increase sensitivity to communicating with people from different cultures.* If we achieve objectives 1-6, then reaching these goals will follow naturally.

Course Format

The course will be conducted as a seminar/workshop: that is, it will be highly interactive with most course time devoted to discussion, exercises, and student-presented reports. The course is designed to take advantage of the rich cultural diversity of the MIT community. Please make every effort to come to class since much of the success of the course—as well as the benefit you will derive from it—will depend on your own participation.

Assignments

The four assignments in “Communicating Across Cultures” are designed to achieve three goals: (1) to allow you to work with the main themes of the course and to delve more deeply into those ideas you find particularly interesting; (2) to ask you to explore your own cultural communication style; and (3) to provide you with the opportunity to learn firsthand about different communication styles and to try out different styles and techniques.

The assignments, their point value, and their due dates are:

Cultural Self-Assessment	10%	Class #4
Book Essay	20%	Class #14
Team Presentation	25%	Class #22-25
Team Report	30%	Class #26
Class Participation	15%	

Texts

Milton J. Bennett, *Basic Concepts of Intercultural Communication*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, Inc., 1998.

Patricia Gercik, *On Track with the Japanese*. First Books Library, 2001

Greg Nees, *Germany. Unraveling an Enigma*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, Inc., 2000.

Hu Wenzhong and Cornelius Grove, *Encountering the Chinese. A Guide for Americans*. 2nd edition. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, Inc., 1999.

In addition, there are articles you will need to read for each class. These articles have been scanned into the course website which is available through Stellar.

Course Outline

Class #1 Introductions: to the Course and Each Other

Class #2 The Challenges of Intercultural Communication

Why is communicating with people from cultures other than your own so challenging? What kind of information and abilities do you need to be equipped with in order to meet that challenge?

Readings Dean Barlund, “Communication in a Global Village”; Edward T. Hall, “The Power of Basic Differences”; LaRay M. Barna, “Stumbling Blocks in Intercultural Communication”; and Janet M. Bennett, “Transition Shock: Putting Culture Shock in Perspective,” in *Basic Concepts*.

Class #3 Cultural Patterning and Variability

Due to a number of factors (e.g., geography, availability of natural resources, the impact of secular or religious leadership, technological innovation), communication patterns vary in individual cultures. In this class, we will look at how the characteristics of cultures differ, as well as a

specific examples of how those differences manifest themselves in particular cultures.

- Readings* Edward C. Stewart, et al., "Cultural Assumptions and Values," in *Basic Concepts*.
Thomas Kochman, "Black and White Cultural Styles in Pluralistic Perspective," in *Basic Concepts*.
Benjamin Lee Whorf, "An American Indian Model of the Universe," *Language, Thought, & Reality*.
Erica A. Goode, "How Culture Molds Habits of Thought," *New York Times*, August 8, 2000.

Class #4 Multicultural Identity

There seems to be a new type of individual emerging in the twenty-first century. He/she doesn't see himself/herself as a member of any established cultural group. Rather he/she is an amalgamation of different ethnic backgrounds and different kinds of experiences. Some of these people call themselves "Third Culture Kids."

- Readings* Peter S. Adler, "Beyond Cultural Identity: Reflections on Multiculturalism," in *Basic Concepts*.

Class #5 The Unique Role of Language

Obviously, the use of language plays a pivotal role in intercultural communication. But language is even more important since it is the very basis of culture: that is, cultures are built through the communication of their members with one another. We will explore that process, and the particular role that symbols play in it.

- Readings* Suzanne Langer, "On a New Definition of 'Symbol,'" *Philosophy in a New Key*.
Benjamin Lee Whorf, "Science and Linguistics," in *Basic Concepts*.
James Carey, "A Cultural Approach to Communication," *Communications*, Volume 2, 1975.

Class #6 Intercultural Interaction: Verbal Communication Styles

We will look more closely at how differences in language and patterns of oral communication manifest themselves from culture to culture.

- Readings* Elinor Ochs, "Introduction," in *Language Socialization Across Cultures*, edited by Bambi Schieffelin and Elinor Ochs.
Clifford Geertz, "Linguistic Etiquette," in *Sociolinguistics. Selected Readings*, edited by J. B. Pride and Janet Holmes.

Fredrik Ulfhielm, "Spoken Japanese: Linguistic Influence on Work Group, Leadership, and Decision-Making," in *Organization Communication: Emerging Perspectives II*, edited by Lee Thayer.
Eleanor Shouby, "The Influence of the Arabic Language on the Psychology of the Arabs," in *Readings in Arab Middle Eastern Societies and Cultures*, edited by A. Lutifiyya and C. Churchill.

Class #7

Intercultural Interaction: Nonverbal Communication Styles

We will do the same for nonverbal communication, which includes such variables as perception and use of time, perception and use of space, body language, and eye contact.

Readings Edward Hall, "The Voices of Time," "Culture Is Communication," "Space Speaks," *The Silent Language*.
W. D. Brewer, "Patterns of Gesture Among the Levantine Arabs," in *Readings in Arab Middle Eastern Societies and Cultures*, edited by A. Lutifiyya and C. Churchill.
Satoshi Ishii and Tom Bruneau, "Silence and Silences in Cross-Cultural Perspective: Japan and the United States," in *Intercultural Communication. A Reader*, edited by Larry A. Samovar and Richard E. Porter.

Class #8 & 9

Intercultural Communication Practices: Listening, Writing, Presenting, Persuading, Negotiating, etc.

Differences in basic communication practices—speaking and writing—play themselves out in more complex communication tasks like persuasion and negotiation. We will explore how these differences manifest themselves.

Readings David A. Victor, "Issues of Contexting and Face-Saving in International Business Communication," *International Business Communication*.
Jean-Louis Barsoux and Peter Lawrence, "The Making of a French Manager," *Harvard Business Review*, July-August, 1991.
James Calvert Scott, "Preparing Business Correspondence the British Way," *The Bulletin*, June 1993.
Arthur H. Bell, W. Tracy Dillon, and Harald Becker, "German Memo and Letter Style," *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, April 1995.
Nancy Adler, "Negotiating with Foreigners," *International Dimensions of Organizational Behavior*.

Class #10

Gender Communications: Why Can't a Woman Speak More Like a Man and Vice Versa

Some sociolinguists believe men and women communicate so differently that they should be seen as using two different “genderlects.” Could this be true?

Readings Daniel N. Maltz and Ruth A. Borker, “A Cultural Approach To Male-Female Miscommunication,” in *Language and Social Identity*, ed. by John Gumperz.

Conceptually, this ends the first half of the course during which we have laid down a ground-work for understanding the roots and manifestations of intercultural communication. Please read Milton Bennett, “Intercultural Communication: A Current Perspective,” in *Basic Concepts* to summarize what we have studied.

In the second half of the course, we will be examining five specific countries in order to understand differences in the communication styles of their members, and how those differences are linked to cultural variables.

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| Class #11 | Case Study #1: Germany
<i>Readings</i> Greg Nees, <i>Germany. Unraveling an Enigma</i> . pp. 35-60 |
| Class #12 | Case Study #1: Germany
<i>Readings</i> Greg Nees, <i>Germany. Unraveling an Enigma</i> . pp. 61-97 |
| Class #13 | Case Study #1: Germany
<i>Readings</i> Greg Nees, <i>Germany. Unraveling an Enigma</i> . pp. 131-170 |
| Class #14 | Case Study #2: France
<i>Readings</i> Richard Bernstein, <i>Fragile Glory</i> , pp. 1-17,
Gilles Asselin, Ruth Mastron, <i>Au Contraire!</i>
<i>Figuring out the French</i> , pp. 110-144 |
| Class #15 | Case Study #2: France
<i>Readings</i> Richard Bernstein, <i>Fragile Glory</i> , pp. 133-145 |
| Class #16 | Case Study #3: From the Islamic World
<i>Readings</i> Paul Berman, “Al Qaeda’s Philosopher,” in: <i>New York Times Magazine</i> |
| Class #17 | Case Study #3: From the Islamic World
<i>Readings</i> Excerpts from Bernard Lewis, <i>What went wrong</i> |
| Class #18 | Case Study #4: Japan
<i>Readings</i> Patricia Gercik, <i>On Track with the Japanese</i> , pp. 1-96 |

- Class #19** **Case Study #4: Japan**
Readings Patricia Gercik, *On Track with the Japanese*,
pp. 180-193
- Class #20** **Case Study #5: China**
Readings Wenzhong Hu, *Encountering the Chinese*.
pp. 1-134
- Class #21** **Case Study #5: China**
Readings Wenzhong Hu, *Encountering the Chinese*.
pp. 134-186
- Class #22** **Team Presentations**
- Class #23** **Team Presentations**
- Class #24** **Team Presentations**
- Class #25** **Team Presentations**
- Class #26** **Wrap-up**