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:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Point Value</th>
<th>Class #</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Self-Assessment</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Book Essay</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Team Presentation</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>22-25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Team Report</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>26</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class Participation</td>
<td>15%</td>
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Texts


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?


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

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

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

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

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**  
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.

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**  

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?


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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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class #11</th>
<th>Case Study #1: Germany</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Readings</td>
<td>Greg Nees, Germany. Unraveling an Enigma. pp. 35-60</td>
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<tr>
<th>Class #13</th>
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<tr>
<td>Readings</td>
<td>Greg Nees, Germany. Unraveling an Enigma. pp. 131-170</td>
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<th>Case Study #2: France</th>
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<tr>
<td>Readings</td>
<td>Richard Bernstein, Fragile Glory, pp. 1-17, Gilles Asselin, Ruth Mastron, Au Contraire! Figuring out the French, pp. 110-144</td>
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<th>Class #17</th>
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<td>Excerpts from Bernard Lewis, What went wrong</td>
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<td>Patricia Gercik, On Track with the Japanese, pp. 1-96</td>
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Class #19  
Case Study #4: Japan  
Readings  Patricia Gercik, *On Track with the Japanese*, pp. 180-193

Class #20  
Case Study #5: China  

Class #21  
Case Study #5: China  

Class #22  
Team Presentations

Class #23  
Team Presentations

Class #24  
Team Presentations

Class #25  
Team Presentations

Class #26  
Wrap-up