

Communicating Between Cultures



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PH 800.634.4941

info@learningseed.com
www.learningseed.com



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Legal Niceties

The Video

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Learning Seed

Suite 301
641 W. Lake St
Chicago, IL 60661
P 800.634.4941
F 800.998.0854
info@learningseed.com
www.learningseed.com

Summary

Some “cultural givens” are so deeply imbedded they are invisible to those who hold them.

Communicating Between Cultures shows how to improve communication in a series of cross-cultural situations:

- Jose is working in the yard next door to Fred. Fred wonders if Jose would do some yard work for him since Mexicans “do such good work”. One problem: Jose is not a yard worker, he’s Fred’s new neighbor who works at a nearby hospital. And he’s not Mexican.
- Lee and his friends are ready to grab a bite to eat. They decide to eat Chinese and ask Lee to pick the best local Chinese restaurant. The problem: Lee is not Chinese and would rather have a burger.
- Ms. Yee and Mr. Franklin discover that “getting right to the point” is as important as “saving face.”
- Jared and Tabore discover that even the simple act of saying “yes” or “no” has cultural implications.
- Brianna is shocked that Illya would graduate from college and even consider living in the same house as his parents.
- Alex can’t understand why Frishta won’t even give him a high five? Find out what he does that teaches the value of cross cultural communication.

Glassland

The video begins with a parable about a place called Glassland:

There is a world in which everyone is born with eyeglasses. They are "built in" like toenails or fingers. No one has ever taken them off. The glasses differ. One type shows only blue. Another paints the world a golden amber glow. Yet others act like a magnifying glass and some are telescopic. One kind drains the world of all color.

Some inhabitants get along all right with people of different glass types, others do not. After all, the blue glasses don't look blue to the people wearing the amber glasses - they look amber, just like everything else. The drab and dreary glass people think those who describe the world as having a beautiful glow are delusional. The golden glow people think to themselves, "OK there are some people who can't see the world as it is. I'll try to understand them, to tolerate them, maybe even feel sorry for their inability to see the glow." Others think they are simply weird. No one in this culture realizes they all wear glasses, any more than a fish understands it swims in water. The people who live in a world in which blue is the only color do not know what blue is. Why? Because they cannot understand the concept of not blue. Put yourself in this world. Who can see you for what you are? Is it the amber glass people? The telescopic eyes? How would you communicate? The society described, is ours of course. The eye glasses are culture. For it is culture that shapes how we view the world, and how we view the world shapes how we communicate.

Discussion

Ask students about the meaning of Glassland. You might want to stop the program and have this discussion before moving on with the program.

Form groups of three. Tell students they are Glasslanders. In each trio, have students select the type of glasses they wear (blue, amber, colorless, magnifying, or telescopic) so that each wears a different type of eyeglass. Have each trio carry on a discussion assuming they have worn these glasses for their entire lives.

1. What does the parable of Glassland have to do with communicating between cultures?

The built-in eyeglasses represent the many "cultural assumptions" we all make without being aware we hold them. These assumptions can lead to communication breakdowns that cause embarrassment, frustration, or even discrimination. Seemingly "obvious" ideas such as your language, being on time, saying what you mean, doing your own thing, using logic to solve problems, and the role of the family are all influenced by culture.

2. Imagine you are transported into Glassland as you are today — no built-in eyeglasses. How would you be received by Glasslanders if your message were that "it's time to remove your glasses and see the world as it really is"?

Your discussion here has to start with the realization that your message would not be welcomed. You might be branded as subversive or mentally unbalanced.

Fred and the Gardener

In the first example of communication breakdown, Fred assumes Jose is a Mexican landscape worker. In reality, he is Fred's new neighbor, an administrator at the local hospital, and a native of El Salvador, not Mexico. Fred is trapped in his own assumptions.

The script observes that perhaps Fred never met a Mexican professional; his cultural bias is that Mexicans do landscape work. His glasses do not reveal differences among Mexicans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, or other Hispanics. Fred's "hidden assumptions" produce what Jose (through HIS cultural glasses) sees as prejudice.

Discussion

1. Is Fred merely too quick to judge or is he prejudiced?

Note: The word prejudice does imply prejudgment. Prejudice and discrimination differ.

2. Why does the video show BOTH Fred AND Jose wearing sunglasses?

The sunglasses are a reminder that we ALL live in a kind of Glassland. It's not just Fred who wears glasses, it's just that in this situation his glasses are what cause the communication problem.

Lee Knows Chinese Food

This situation is similar to the previous, but the cultural assumptions here are about Asians instead of Latinos. “Oriental” means “from the east” and was first used by the ancient Romans. To call Asians “Orientals” is to describe them in terms of a difference from oneself. It is somewhat like Asians calling Americans “westerners.” Both terms are filtered through different colored glasses.

Is this situation an example of ethnic discrimination?

In a sense, both “Fred and the Gardener” and “Lee Knows Chinese Food” illustrate a lack of discrimination. Discrimination means to see differences.

For example Japanese and Koreans see themselves as very different, as do people from Sweden and Norway. Those who cannot see these differences lack the ability to discriminate.

Language

The error here is to assume that people who do not speak English correctly are lacking in intelligence. This error is more likely to be made by someone who speaks only English and has never tried to speak a different language. Eduardo speaks to Carmen in Spanish in order to make sure she understands the directions. But Mary (who does not speak Spanish) feels uneasy and suspects Eduardo of “trying to hide something.”

How do you feel in the presence of a conversation you do not understand? Do you “feel” differently if you feel the conversation is ABOUT you? Many Americans view a “foreign” language through glasses that color it as a tool “foreigners” use to hide something or exclude them. Imagine yourself as a native born American who works in China and you speak passable Chinese. If you run into a fellow American, would you speak Chinese or English?

Discuss this comment-to-camera:

“...Americans think English, French and Irish accents are cute or charming. But they don’t find Asian accents as attractive.”

Is this prejudice or truth?

Direct vs. Indirect

Advice such as “say what you mean,” “get right to the point”, and “speak your mind,” are obvious virtues to Americans. But for many cultures in Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America social harmony is more important than “getting to the point.” For example, in Japan it would be rude to say “I disagree with that” or “No.” You’re wrong.”

Indirect communication includes the idea of “saving face” and not causing embarrassment. It’s important in decision making and doing business.

Ms. Yee and Mr. Franklin discuss a report done by Mr. Hughes that Franklin calls “a disaster.” He asks Ms. Yee “who is responsible” and expects a direct answer. But Ms. Yee is much more interested in preserving group harmony than in pinning the blame on someone. The conflict between her concern for harmony and Franklin’s desire to discover who is responsible causes discomfort. Ms. Yee is flustered and agrees to “get back to you about that,” while Mr. Franklin feels she is trying to shield incompetence.

Tabore Gives a Ride

Jared asks Tabore for a ride. He would expect Tabore to either help him offer an excuse for saying “no.” But Tabore was raised in a culture that favors more indirect methods of saying “yes” and “no.” Tabore hesitates and says, “I may have to make some arrangements.” Both the hesitation and the comment are indirect signals to Jared that he is not the person to ask for a ride. But Jared, who does not notice indirect signals, assumes Tabore is agreeing.

To Tabore, it is the responsibility of the person asking for the favor to pick up on the signals and act so that the embarrassment of saying no is avoided. To turn down a favor, even WITH an excuse is not polite in cultures that favor indirect communication. It would be Jared’s responsibility to pick up signals so Tabore does not have to say “no.”

One way of explaining this difference is to point out some cultures prefer a “high context” style while others favor a “low context” approach. In the U.S., a low context style is preferred. This means the exact words said are the most important, and their context (the situation, the way they are said, etc.) is less important. In a high context society, the context (“the space around the words”) is often more important than the words themselves.

People from high and low context societies who do not understand this cultural difference are likely to experience communication breakdowns. The temptation is to blame the breakdowns on the other person —“I just wish she would just say what she means.”

Americans often find various Asian cultures difficult to comprehend because of this difference in style, while many Asians find Americas rude and overbearing.

Patterns of Conversation

The video uses the metaphor of sport to illustrate differing styles of conversation. The American style of conversation most resembles a tennis game. One person has the ball and hits it to the other who returns it as the game continues. If one player does not return a shot, the conversation stops. Either player may start a “new set” by serving up a different topic. Some people see conversation as a competitive sport in which they try to “score points.”

Discussion

1. Describe various styles of communication in terms of a tennis game. Following are script excerpts to serve as a basis for discussion:

Other cultures, Japanese for example, favor a style that resembles a game of bowling. (This metaphor adapted from *Polite Fictions: Why Japanese and Americans Seem Rude* by Nancy Sakamoto and Reiko Naotso). Each person waits patiently for a turn and knows his or her place. One's turn to speak is shaped by factors such as the relationship to others, age, and status. Long silences are not only tolerated but valued. For Americans, even two or three seconds of silence can seem uncomfortable.

Now, don't think that Greeks cannot listen quietly at times. And yes, a casual conversation among Asians can often resemble more of a soccer game than bowling. Culture shapes behavior but individual differences are also strong.

Not understanding “rules of conversation” means Japanese sometimes find Americans pushy and don't allow time for careful answers. While Americans sometimes find Japanese speakers passive and uninterested.

Japanese speaker: “Back home we don't hold debates. The idea of ‘scoring points’ in debate is not part of our culture.”

“I notice in the U.S. a conversation is all about taking turns. It's sort of like a jazz group where each instrument takes a turn at a solo. Back home a conversation is more like an orchestra with different voices at once – it's noisier and more animated. Americans tell me I get excited about little things.”

To Latin American or Middle Eastern people, Americans seem passive or uninterested while Americans can't understand why Greeks or Italians seem to shout at each other instead of talking calmly. Each plays the conversation differently.

2. Discuss different rules of taking turns during a conversation and the rules of “breaking in” or “starting a new game.”

3. How do you deal with “silence” in conversations? In general, Americans find silences awkward or a sign of communication breakdown. The Japanese are among those cultures that value silences. To the Japanese, an American might appear pushy and overly inquisitive. To the American, the Japanese seems uninvolved.

Kim Offered Help

Mike offers newcomer Kim help at his first day at school. He says casually, “Stop by some time and we can go over the homework together.” To Mike, the offer is a general show of helpfulness, but Kim is not familiar with American idioms so interprets it literally. When he asks Mike for help, it turns out to be the wrong time. Kim does not know why Mike did not keep his word.

Discussion

1. Is Mike giving Kim a “brush off” or is there a cultural misunderstanding here? Why does Kim seem hurt by the fact that Mike won’t help now?

Americans are often friendly to people they meet. But a frequent problem is that foreigners misinterpret American friendliness as an offer of friendship. The act of extending friendship carries expectations that the American is unaware of. Mike is simply being friendly, Kim takes this as an offer of friendship.

Americans value close friendships but they also value privacy and independence. The word “privacy” in other languages (for example, Russian, Japanese, and Arabic) means “being alone” or “lonely.” Those raised without individualism as a value have a difficult time understanding why Americans value privacy.

A foreigner who meets Americans at a party and hears them say, “We’ll get together some time” may feel disappointed when they do not call back.

Illya Lands a Job

Ilya and Brianna just graduated from college. Ilya is heading back to Russia and tells Brianna his new job is near where his parents live. Brianna responds, "That's nice. So you won't be too far from them."

Brianna assumes that Ilya will be living on his own and not too far from his parents. Americans typically raise their children to be independent. So Brianna assumes that Ilya is ready to go out on his own. But Ilya isn't going to live NEAR his parents; he's going to live WITH them.

Ilya explains, "For me, to work in the same town as my parents but to have my own apartment is unthinkable. In my culture, parents raise their children to rely on them for help, advice, and support."

Discussion

1. What cultural difference caused the confusion in this example?

This difference in how children relate to parents is not specifically a Russian trait, it can be found in many cultures.

Note that Brianna's problem is not that she lacks knowledge of Russian culture. Her "problem" is that she assumes others have the same values and desires that she does. She assumes young people want to get away from their parents as soon as they can. She might even assume that anyone that does not share her belief is somehow "abnormal" as a result.

Frishta and Alex

Frishta seems friendly but refuses to participate in a high five from Alex after a study session. Alex cannot understand the rejection. Could it be racial? Does he have B.O.? Does Frishta think he's flirting?

The point here is NOT that Alex should know better. There is so much variety among peoples that we all are likely, at some point, to find ourselves suddenly swimming against strong cultural currents. The purpose of this illustration is to suggest a general attitude toward cultural differences.

Option: Stop for discussion immediately after the rejection.

Discussion

1. Should Alex have known NOT to offer Frishta a high five?

He did not know Frishta well enough to realize she was a Muslim. Not all cultural differences are visible, even to a discerning person.

2. OK, so Alex made an honest mistake. What is the point of this situation — to make sure we don't make the same mistake?

The "point" of this situation is NOT "Alex should have known better." It is that he kept the lines of communication open and asked Frishta about it. This was not an easy decision on his part since it could involve yet another rejection. But he was rewarded by learning more about Frishta. His world was expanded ever so slightly.

The point here is to deal with cultural differences instead of hiding from them or fearing conflict. Also note that he did not confront Frishta and say "what's wrong with you?" He accepted her explanation.

The key in such discussions is to keep an open mind and to see the situation from the other person's point of view rather than to pass judgment on the culture.

Resources

Note that this program does not make a point of matching cultural habits with a specific ethnic group. It is unlikely the average person would remember a long list of cultural differences. The point here is to be aware that cultural differences exist and often explain what seems to be illogical or even rude behavior. It is unrealistic to expect a person to know the multitude of cultural values and differences in the world.

Diversity Consciousness: Opening Our Minds To People, Cultures, and Opportunities
by Richard D. Bucher (Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, NJ, 2000).

Bucher's book is a short (230 pages) textbook for college courses in diversity. The book is quite readable and could be used with advanced high school students.

Cross-Cultural Dialogues: 74 Brief Encounters With Cultural Difference
by Craig Storti (Intercultural Press, Yarmouth, Maine, 1994).

This brief paperback presents 74 short examples of cross-cultural communication gone awry. Each example is analyzed seeking the cultural assumption that sends the attempted communication careening into confusion. Only 140 pages but packed with practical examples that lend themselves to classroom analysis.

Communication Between Cultures (4th edition)

by Larry A. Samovar and Richard E. Porter (Wadsworth Press, Belmont, CA, 2001).

This college text explores differences in perception, world views, values, and verbal and nonverbal messages.

Also available from Wadsworth is Intercultural Communication: A Reader

by Larry A. Samovar and Richard E. Porter.

The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently...and Why

by Richard E. Nisbett (The Free Press, NY, 2003).

Nisbett demonstrates that people actually think about—and even see—the world differently because of differing cultures and social systems. A fascinating exploration in social psychology.