

Means of developing cultural awareness, national identity and intercultural communication skills

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The present paper will introduce the experience of raising the cultural self-awareness of Belarusian students through interactive cross-cultural games like Cultural Detective and other tools.

Key words: culture, national identity, comparison, cultural values, critical incidents

Introduction

To know how other people behave takes intelligence, but to know myself takes wisdom (John Heider, *The Tao of Leadership*, 1998). This wisdom is the cornerstone of successful cross-cultural communication. When you understand yourself you can better understand the Other and become an efficient communicator. To know yourself also means to know the culture you identify yourself with, at least at a given moment.

Culture is part and parcel of national identity understood as a dynamic mental (or emotional) construct based on certain objective prerequisites related to geography, human geography, history, anthropology, economy and technology on the one hand and culture both as artifacts and a shared system of beliefs, values, rules and norms of behaviour, symbols and relations

with a “Bigger brother”, etc. on the other hand.

It is exactly the objective factors like geography, history, anthropology, technology that in the long run shape every culture, its beliefs, values and norms. Hence, through improving cultural awareness we develop the national identity of those we train.

The least a teacher of intercultural communication can do is promote understanding and knowledge of the students’ own culture. On top of helping them develop communication skills it may also contribute to the development of national identity awareness. It is especially important for Belarus which is reputed to have a notoriously weak national identity.

To accomplish this challenging objective, one would need some background information which is not an easy thing to find in this case. There is still little, if any, information on the Belarusian culture to

be found in literature. Some progress has been recently made thanks to R. Lewis who asked the author of the present paper to do a pilot study using his NCP (National Cultural Profile) questionnaire. The results of the analysis of the responses of 35 people are given in the Attachment.

Filling out the NCP questionnaire is one of the ways used at the Belarusian State University, meant to improve the cultural awareness of the students.

Some other options, tested so far by the author, are:

- Description of the foundations of the Belarusian culture, undertaken by students after the lecture on “Why do cultures differ?”
- Written papers by students evaluating themselves and then their relatives and friends according to dimensions developed by G. Hofstede, E. Hall, etc.
- More papers based on a comparative behaviour analysis of representatives of another culture that the Belarusian students have communicated face-to-face.
- Making a report of behaviours that demonstrate the student’s view of Belarus as possessing a high or low context culture.
- Course papers analysing various aspects of Belarusian culture (e.g., organizational communication patterns and their connection with the Belarusian proverbs and sayings as a reflection of culture, archetypes used in advertising, etc., based on Fons Trompenaars’ works).
- A PhD dissertation on the Activity Orientation of Belarusians.

- Interactive Cultural Detective series learning instruments (see www.culturaldetective.com).

Background

The Cultural Detective learning tool, designed by Dianne Hofner Saphiere (Nipporica), is primarily addressed to business people who plan to do business with or collaborate with people from other cultures. All Cultural Detective packages have an identical structure. There is a Participant’s Guide and a Facilitator’s Guide and a Series Guide which provides general principles for the use of the material.

The structure of the participant and facilitator manuals is the same: introduction into the tool, some background information about the culture, anecdotes and proverbs that illustrate its values, a cultural value lens that names the core values of the culture both in English and in the native language, in our case Belarusian. It also provides a positive statement of the value as well as how others from outside the culture may hold a negative view of the values or behaviours that they give rise to in each case. This is followed by half a dozen critical incidents, with instructions in how to analyse them and worksheets for the learner to do the analysis on.

The Worksheet has three sections. The first one – in two columns – asks for a non-evaluative description of the words and actions taken by both participants of the incident. In the second part, the learner(s) use the information provided in the value lens and its explication (look for the “cultural sense”) of the possible cultural values that led to the described words and actions on

the part of both parties in the case. In the final section, the worksheet (this time in one column) is used to look for the so-called “cultural bridges”, i.e. recommendations to both parties on how to resolve the cultural clash or misunderstanding, as well as what to do in order to avoid similar cultural bumps in the future and in fact, where possible, to take advantage of the cultural value differences for a better collaboration and synergy.

The Facilitator’s guide has more background information about the culture, there are additional anecdotes and sayings, examples of behaviour patterns. There is also a very detailed explanation of how to arrange the analysis of critical incidents as well as model worksheet resolutions of the incidents presented in the Participant’s Guide. More links to music, information, picture Internet sites are given to enrich the learning experience.

The advantages of this learning tool are numerous. Despite being quite concise, it provides information enough to shape an impression of the culture in question, it does not require much time, it does not depend on abstract technical terms (i.e. “high-context”, “low-context,” “individualism”, etc.) which makes it extremely useful for learners with no background knowledge of intercultural communication theory. It can be used both by groups and by individuals, via the Internet or in hard copy, with the instructor or by the interested parties themselves (though this is less recommended as feedback and interactivity are salient features of the learning experience). It is a good resource for those who wish to become aware of their own culture

as well as for those who are interested in other cultures.

Experience and discussion

The experience of using the “Cultural Detective: Belarus”, both within its home culture at the Belarusian State University and abroad, in Sweden, at Kalmar University, have shown the usefulness of the game for the development of intercultural communication competence skills and for a deeper understanding of the native culture of the participants.

Thus, in the analysis of critical incidents, Media and Communications students of Kalmar University showed a number of specifically Swedish reactions, e.g., creating a “cultural bridge” for the incident describing a Belarusian woman at an exchange program in France. She preferred to make a present of a beautiful cake she had made to a wedding party rather than to sell it for a large amount of money. Three separately working groups of Swedish students unanimously said that the French should have just offered less money, *not to make the woman feel uncomfortable*. This reaction fits into the concept of modesty and non-imposition important for Swedish culture. The comments made by both the Belarusian and by the Swedish lecturers were highly appreciated by the students and increased their awareness of their own culture.

The Belarusian students both of Communications and of Political Science Departments of the Belarusian state University find the Cultural Detective very helpful in shaping their cultural (hence, national) identity awareness. They just want more of it.

The culture of the participants plays a considerable role in how the learning experience goes. For Belarusians (as well as for users of the Cultural Detective in other cultures), the most difficult thing is the non-evaluative description of the words said and actions taken by the parties involved in the critical incidents. The students tend to skip this stage (which, in my opinion, is crucial for the formation of intercultural communication competence skills) and jump to conclusions and evaluation.

Experience shows that the cultural bridges (recommendations to those involved in the critical incidents) suggested by the players tend to be rather general, non-specific on the one hand (e.g., “learn more about the culture”), and reflect the area of studies of the students, on the other hand (e.g., “communication” was suggested in most cases by most of the Swedish students majoring in communication). This is another reason why a facilitator is important for the game. (Another Cultural Detective tool focusing on the skills of bridge building is currently being developed).

Another issue that needs attention is the arrangement of clients (in our case, students) who take part in the game. Three approaches have been tried: individual work, group work and pair work. In all cases the results were presented to the rest of the group. All arrangements worked well. However, to increase the interactivity aspect of the game and to improve active participation and involvement, it seems reasonable to split the work into three stages changing the composition of the participant groups, at least for student audiences. It might work even better, if for each stage

of the game (description, evaluation, bridging) the case and worksheet are passed to a new group. Thus, all students in class will know all the cases, they will have an opinion about them and an opportunity to discuss the solutions they suggest and the way the cases had been described and analysed by others.

To further improve the intercultural communication skills and cultural awareness of students, it is advisable to work longer and in greater detail on the background information, i.e. the Cultural Detective should be introduced after the introduction of cultural taxonomies and after other types of work mentioned at the beginning of this presentation. It is to the benefit of the students to make an analysis of the core values presented in the Cultural Detective with other approaches to values and to “translate” the core values into technical terms (e.g., collectivism), that will both allow to check how well the students know the terminology and to see whether they are capable of looking at the same issue from a different angle.

A difficulty that has to be taken into consideration is that the evaluation of actions presupposes at least some knowledge of the culture of the second party in the critical incident. In an Intercultural Communication course class, this can be just another challenge for the students and a check-point for the lecturer. In business situations, if the participants have no first-hand knowledge of the cultures in question, the only way this could be solved is the Facilitator commenting on the culture or by using the Cultural Detective lens of the other culture in the case study or situation.

And, last but not least, it is good to start with the “Cultural Detective: Your Own National Culture” and then play it for some more cultures. It will further build up the awareness of the students’ own culture and increase their interest, motivation and knowledge of intercultural communication.

Conclusion

“Cultural Detective” is a good tool to be used in Intercultural Communication or other (e.g. Modern Language, Cross-cultural

or Behavioural Psychology, etc.) classes. It helps students to build up the awareness of their own culture, of other cultures, it trains the decision-making skills, develops a non-evaluative approach to the analysis of people’s actions, improves the students’ group-work techniques, strengthens their tolerance of diversity, as well as gives the lecturer another opportunity to check the students’ understanding of the course material, their knowledge of terminology, of taxonomies and the readiness of the students to apply the information they get in real life situations.

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KULTŪRINIO SUPRATIMO, TAUTINIO TAPATUMO IR TARPKULTŪRINĖS KOMUNIKACIJOS ĮGŪDŽIŲ UGDYMO PRIEMONĖS

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S a n t r a u k a

Straipsnyje diskutuojama, kokia yra kultūrinio studentų savęs supratimo patirtis, kaip ji atsiskleidžia studentų darbuose: esė, iš analizių, interviu, iš eksperimentų, klausimynų ir kt. Ypač dėmesys straipsnyje telkiamas į interaktyvios tarpkultūrinės priemonės,

tokios kaip „Kultūrinis detektyvas“, taikymą. Įvairių kultūrų (švedų ir baltarusių) studentų reakcijos – analizės objektas. Autorė siūlo keletą galimų „Kultūrinio detektyvo“ ir kitų priemonių, kaip taikytinų, dėstant Tarpkultūrinės komunikacijos dalyką.