

Teaching Cross-Cultural Communication through Theater Play – Innovation in Management Education

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Abstract: *Today's classrooms are filled by students who are from Generation Y. These students believe in smart work rather than hard work, are feedback dependent and visual-kinesthetic learners. They prefer to learn by doing. Hence there is a need to move away from traditional classroom teaching and adapt learner-centric pedagogy. Experiential learning has been established as an effective pedagogy. This paper illustrates the design, implementation, and effectiveness of an innovative pedagogy – using theatre play to teach cross-cultural communication. It has important implications for faculty and business schools which can benefit from shifting towards learner-centric teaching.*

Keywords: *Cross-cultural, Communication, theatre play, innovation, pedagogy, management education*

I. INTRODUCTION

Today's learners belong to "Gen Y", who are tech savvy, believe in smart work rather than hard work and are feedback-dependent. They are visual-kinesthetic learners, who learn by doing. Medina (2008), states that the attention level of a Gen Y student takes a dive, approximately 10 minutes into a lesson. Price (2009) found that Gen Y learns through 5 R's; Research-based methods, Rationale, Relaxed, Relevance and Rapport. They prefer research based group projects and are engaged by lecture materials that cater to their visual, auditory and kinesthetic needs. They value information only when it is relevant to their lives. Moreover, they respond to the information positively when provided with the rationale. Students belonging to Gen Y prefer a relaxed learning environment which offers them freedom for personal expression and creativity. These learners also perform better in the classroom when instructors establish a rapport with them (Laskaris, 2016). Hence the traditional method of teaching was relooked in order to move towards an experiential learning pedagogy.

I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand.

~ Confucius, 450 BC

"Experiential [learning] is a philosophy and methodology in which educators purposefully engage with students in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, and clarify values" (Association for Experiential Education, para. 2). According to Lewis and Williams (1994, p.5), experiential learning means learning from experience or learning by doing. Rogers (1969) considered experiential learning "significant" as compared to what he called "meaningless" cognitive learning. The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) Task Force (1986, p. 3) defined applied experiential learning as "A business curriculum-related endeavor which is interactive (other than between teacher and pupil) and is characterized by variability and uncertainty".

According to Wolfe and Byrne (1975), experiential learning involves four phases: design, conduct, evaluation, and feedback. The 'design phase' involves instructor's efforts to set learning objectives, select activities, identify factors affecting student learning and create a scheme for implementation. The 'conduct phase' involves implementing the design and is a structured and closely-monitored one. In the 'evaluation phase', the instructor provides opportunities for students to evaluate their experience and demonstrate the learning. The 'feedback phase' is a continuous process from the beginning till the end. This process of experiential learning is similar in nature to the one proposed by Kolb (1984) and Lewin (1951). A key element of experiential learning, therefore, is the student, and that learning takes place (the knowledge gained) as a result of being personally involved in this pedagogical approach. In this context, experiential learning pedagogy was used to make students understand the cultural differences in communication across the globe (Giesen, 2011).

Problem Statement

While teaching cross cultural communication, the instructors tried a few experiential learning activities (since 2011) like "Face to face with a man-eater (Annexure 1)", "BaFa BaFa (Annexure 2)", and "Culture show".

In "Face to face with a man-eater" (activity used in 2011), the students were paired and briefed about the role they had to play. One student played the role of a sailor, who is the survivor of a shipwreck near the west coast of Australia. The sailor finds his way to an island and encounters another student, who plays the role

of the native of that island. They were asked to communicate using only gestures and nonlinguistic sounds. The students thus experienced the difficulties in communicating with a person belonging to a completely different culture. Following the activity, discussions were initiated and students were made to experience culture shock and thereby understand the importance of intercultural communication.

In “BaFa BaFa” (activity used in 2012), the entire class was divided into two. One group belonged to “Alpha Culture” and the other to “Beta culture”. Each group was introduced to a different set of cultural values and allowed to practice playing a card game according to these values. The Alpha culture is a relationship oriented, strong in-group out-group culture. It is patterned on closed “high context” cultures where interpersonal relationships and physical closeness are prized values. As the “Alpha Culture” is a non-competitive culture, its card game has no winners or losers. The Beta culture is a highly competitive “time is money”, “you are what you earn” trading culture. It has its own specialized trading language. Participants of the two groups were briefed about their culture and then were allowed to trade. When they indulged in trade they experienced the culture shock and also understood the importance of cross-cultural differences.

In the “Culture Show” (activity used in 2013), the instructors chose eight countries of the world and assigned each country to a group of 22 students. The students were instructed to follow a checklist and stage a show to demonstrate the culture of that particular country. The checklist included understanding social customs, learning about clothing and food preferences, political patterns, religious and folk beliefs, economic and business institutions and the nature of ethics, values, and laws. Students were given a month’s time to plan, prepare and exhibit the show. Each group was allotted a stall space in which they had to exhibit their country’s culture. The display in each stall included artifacts, food, clothing, and business practices. This activity gave them an opportunity to learn about one particular country’s culture. However, students were enthusiastic in exhibiting their stalls and lacked the initiative to visit other stalls and learn about the other countries which were exhibited. Hence the learning of the students was limited only to that country which was exhibited by them.

All the above activities kept the students engaged, gave them an experience of culture shock, and equipped them with the knowledge about one country’s culture only. However, the instructors felt that the learning through these activities was not sufficient to prepare them for a multi-cultural business environment. Hence they had to innovate an activity that will give students sufficient knowledge about the various cultures and customs prevailing in the business environment. In this context, the instructors chose “Theatre play” as a pedagogy to teach intercultural communication.

II. METHODOLOGY

The theatre is being used extensively in arts and literature. Movies were used to teach intercultural communication (Slumdog Millionaire was used by Cardon to teach stereotyping, Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad used “My big fat Greek wedding movie to teach cross cultural communication). But the movies focused only on two cultures. Though theatre has been used as pedagogy in arts and literature, it was not used much in management education. A review of the literature by the authors did not yield any result pertaining to the use of theatre to teach intercultural communication to management students. Hence using theatre play to teach cross-cultural communication to business graduates is an innovative pedagogy. This innovative pedagogy has three phases as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1 – Phases of Innovative Pedagogy
*AOL = Assurance of Learning

Design

Based on the gaps in the previous methodologies, the instructors designed the theatre play activity for a period of six months. During the design phase, the instructors set the objectives and learning outcomes for the pedagogy. The primary objectives of this pedagogy were to prepare aspiring management graduates to live or work in other cultures and to enable them to experience and learn the culture of growing economies in the world. At the end of the play, students should have experienced and learned the social customs, economic and business scenario, clothing and food preferences, nature of ethics, values, and laws of the various countries. The secondary objective was to improve their confidence, creativity, time management and interpersonal communication.

Instructors also identified the factors affecting student learning and created a scheme for implementation. They selected eight countries (Africa, Australia, China, France, Germany, Japan, U.A.E., and U.S.A) which were growing economies during that period. They devised the guidelines for the theatre play, based on a checklist that covered all facets of a country’s culture.

Implementation

The instructors, non-teaching staff, and students were involved in the implementation of the play, which spanned across three months. The instructors divided a batch of 45 students into two groups and assigned a country to each group. This was done for 4 batches, resulting in eight groups exploring eight different countries. Each group elected a leader, who in turn had to divide the entire group into different sub-groups. The leader discussed with the group and gave a plan to execute the play. The plan consisted of the roles and responsibilities of the members and a time frame for the different phases of execution of the play.

In the first phase, they had to develop a storyline which incorporated all the aspects of the checklist. After approval of the storyline by the instructors, the group had to develop a script. The script was reviewed by the instructors and suggestions were given. After a few iterations, the script was approved.

The groups then planned for the costumes, food items, artifacts and other properties needed for the play. They also practiced the script and a few rehearsals were done before the instructors. A final on-stage costume rehearsal was witnessed before the execution.

The play was finally staged. While one group hosted the play, the remaining seven groups were the audience. This way all the groups took turns to stage their plays during the entire week.

Assurance of Learning

After the play, the instructors created a google docs survey, to receive feedback from all the students, pertaining to their experiential learning from the play. From the survey results, it was evident that 90 per cent of the students were confident to travel and to do business with the eight countries showcased in the play. In answering the question about their learning experience, students had shared that they had learned to plan, organize, coordinate, manage time and resources, adapt, cope with stress, work in teams, be patient, delegate, listen, achieve goals, handle uncertainties and grievances, and communicate effectively. They had also improved their confidence levels, trust factor, commitment towards work and level of motivation. The feedback helped the instructors to close the loop and ensure assurance of learning. The responses were consolidated and a few excerpts are presented in Annexure 4.

Sustenance

As the pedagogy assured the learning outcomes in an effective manner, the instructors sustained theatre play as a methodology to teach cross-cultural communication to management students. In the academic year 2015-2016, two countries were added to the existing list. The activity was again repeated in the academic year 2016-2017 with ten countries. During both years, the survey was repeated and the learning outcomes were ensured.

III. IMPACT OF THE INNOVATIVE PEDAGOGY

Impact within the Institution

The culture play gave the students ample opportunity to learn the cultural facets of the eight countries. They understood the *social customs* (nature of the society, people's reaction to strangers, greeting, business, social and gifting etiquettes), *clothing and food preferences* (clothing for various occasions like wedding, business meetings and mourning; eating habits and dining etiquettes), *political patterns* and their impact on business, *religious and folk beliefs*, *economic and business scenarios* (languages spoken, primary resources and principal products, working hours and appropriate mode of conducting business), *nature of ethics, values, and laws* (attitudes towards work, money and peoples' beliefs and values).

Apart from this, it helped them to plan, organize and execute a project involving a big team. It also helped them to hone their interpersonal, team building, leadership skills and overall their oral and written communication skills.

Impact outside the Institution

Apart from the impact created on the students, the theatre play also had an impact outside the Institution as well. The local media was invited to view the plays. They interviewed the faculty and students after the play. This gave an opportunity for the students to share their learning with the media. The event was published in "The Hindu" dated October 26, 2014. This gave visibility to the Institute and helped in building its brand. The published article is enclosed (Annexure 3)

IV. CONCLUSION

The success of higher education depends on its ability to cater to the needs of Gen Y, who prefer to learn by experience. Hence experiential learning is the need of the hour for today's classrooms. Cantor (1995) opines that experiential learning can help institutions stay relevant to students by providing them with the necessary skills to transition into the workforce. It can also be an effective pedagogy for the faculty, which can assure learning. This paper presented the design, implementation and outcome assessment of using theatre play to teach intercultural communication. It demonstrated that understanding students' needs and adopting appropriate teaching strategies will ensure effective learning. Since this pedagogy has resulted in the assurance of learning, it can be adopted by other Business Schools to teach intercultural communication.

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Annexure 1

Face to face with a man-eater

MM Monipally: *Business Communication Strategies*
Tata Mc Graw-Hill, New Delhi

TRB 1:1A (Instructions at: TRB Chapter 1, Activity 1:1)

Face to face with a man-eater

You are an Indian sailor, the only survivor of a shipwreck near the west coast of Australia. You have been washed ashore. When you regain consciousness you find yourself faced with an Australian aborigine, most probably of the man-eating tribe of Western Australia.

The aborigine appears to be somewhat hostile. He might harm you. He might be dreaming of cooking and eating you with his friends. Reassure him that you are harmless and that you are not carrying any guns. Impress on him that you've had a shipwreck. Tell him that you are from a small village in India, that you have two elderly parents and four children to look after. If he doesn't turn violent, tell him that you are thirsty and hungry. Could he give you some water and fruits? You are a vegetarian. So let him know that you can't eat meat or fish.

Do not use any words. Use only gestures and, if necessary, nonlinguistic sounds.

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TRB 1:1B (Instructions at: TRB Chapter 1, Activity 1:1).

Face to face with a dangerous foreigner

You are an aborigine living on the western coast of Australia. This morning as you come out to fish in the shallow waters of the sea, you find a dangerous looking man lying on the beach. He is neither white nor black but somewhat brown. He is not from your part of the world. Now he is getting up and looking at you.

Hang on and find out what he is like. Use only gestures and, if necessary, nonlinguistic sounds. He can't make sense of your words. More than anything else, be careful. Don't be too friendly. Ask him to get away before he gets into trouble. He may have one of those weapons that send out fire and smoke with a big sound. He might kill you if he stays on. You can never trust these foreigners. Don't smile or show friendliness until you are sure his intentions are good and that he has no weapons.

Annexure 2

BaFa BaFa

I Learning Objective(s)	<p>(1) To help students come to understand the meaning and impact of culture</p> <p>(2) To demonstrate how one's feelings of attachment to a given culture are learned through the processes of socialization, and that one's tendency to judge other cultures is based on one's own cultural perspective.</p> <p>(3) To demonstrate the potential for misinterpretation that arises when one evaluates another culture solely from the perspective of one's own values</p> <p>(4) To build awareness of the extent to which cultures can vary (cultural difference) and to help students work through these differences</p> <p>(5) To help students to come to appreciate cultural diversity and to examine their attitudes and behaviors towards others who are 'different' than themselves.</p>
II Rationale for Objectives	By participating in this cultural simulation designed to foster cross-cultural awareness, students will come to experience the development and impact of stereotypes. By developing a deliberately narrow and stereotypical view of a 'foreign culture', and subsequently examining their own reactions to this culture, and of the other culture's stereotypical reaction to them, students come to appreciate the negative impact of stereotypes and of the need to foster greater tolerance and understanding of others in all spheres of life.
IV Procedures	
(1) Introduction	Randomly assign students into two groups to two artificial cultures: "Alpha" and "Beta" cultures. Each group is introduced to a different set of cultural values and allowed to practice playing a card game according to these values. The Alpha culture is a relationship oriented, strong in-group out-group culture. It is patterned on closed "high-context" cultures where interpersonal relationships and physical closeness are prized values. As a non-competitive culture, its card game has no winners or losers. The Beta culture is a highly competitive "time is money", "you are what you earn" trading culture. It has its own specialized "trading language".
(2) Activity	Participants are introduced or "briefed" about the rituals, customs and language of their culture and given time to practice and live in their new culture (Rules/instructions can be modified as appropriate). Observers and visitors are exchanged on a "tourist-like" basis for very brief periods of time. It is forbidden to explain the rules of either culture to visitors so the only means of understanding is observation and trial and error participation. Before the Alphans talk to each other, for example, they must first touch each other. Thus, Betans will not be immediately aware that in order to speak with an Alphan, they must first touch the other person, and will be ignored by the Alphans when they try to speak to them. Sanctions are imposed when cultural norms are violated. After repeated attempts by the Betans to talk to the Alphans, the Alphans will offer the Betan visitor a card, which lets other Alphans know that the visitor has been sanctioned.
(3) Discussion	<p><input type="checkbox"/> What does BAFA BAFA teach us about how we judge, represent, understand, and communicate with those who are different from us?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> What assumptions about "others" are reflected in the design of the BAFA BAFA simulation? What did you learn about yourself and others during the simulation?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> What does it teach us about social processes and social structures?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> What is the impact of not knowing about another culture on your impressions of this culture? How might this be changed?</p>

Annexure 3
Press Release – The Hindu dt 26.10.14



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Updated: October 26, 2014 12:07 IST

Stage-plays help students hone skills, learn cultures Karthik Madhavan

The Hindu

Students of PSG Institute of Management staging a play on Australian culture and customs, as part of a project to gain insights on economies across the globe. Photo: K. Ananthan

The objective was to encourage students to learn other cultures and also improve their communication skills, says Author Name, Assistant Professor.

Until a couple of days ago, first year management student Nivethitha Subalakshmi was asking, cajoling, prodding and doing everything possible to ensure that a few of her classmates, who were part of a team, came together to execute their assignment – staging a play.

She had to pass on instructions on a messaging application, delegate authority, keep the lethargic on their toes and bring the best out of the talented ones. “It was a tough, exciting task indeed,” says the PSG Institute of Management student.

Her team was asked to stage a play that would highlight Chinese culture – their social and business etiquette.

The objective was to encourage students to learn other cultures and also improve their communication skills, says Author Name, Assistant Professor.

Team building

For Aditya L., another first year student, the task enabled him to spot the best in his team members, give the task they would excel in so that the team succeeded as a unit. “Aside from learning Arab culture, the assignment also helped me build team, delegate responsibility, coordinate work and bring out the best in people.”

Ms. Gayathridevi had divided the students in to eight groups of 22 or 23 students each, asking them to stage plays that would highlight the culture, social and business etiquette of Arabian countries, Africa, China, France, Japan, Germany, the U.S. and Australia.

The objective of asking the students to do so was to help them learn better – when the students get to stage plays their retention capacity increased and they understood things better.

They also improved their communication skills in the process, she said.

The students said that they had worked for over a month, brainstormed on the play theme, wrote scripts, revised them, went out looking for costume and did much more than they would have if they had learnt about the countries using presentations or seminars.

Annexure 4
Feedback from students – Excerpts from Google Docs Survey

10/29/2014 15:36:15	This exercise gave me a great experience and exposure on organizing. It was extremely interesting and fun filled leaning experience.
10/29/2014 16:37:41	There was a lot of team work and mainly there was a lot of communication that has to be done to convey one's message to everyone else in a proper manner.
10/29/2014 13:23:38	Managing a large group of people about 21. Managing last minute changes.
10/28/2014 18:56:27	Team work ,coordination and time management
10/29/2014 14:45:20	Team work, patience, listening to others, co-ordination and an active participation
10/28/2014 18:56:27	Team work ,coordination and time management
10/29/2014 14:45:20	Team work, patience, listening to others, co-ordination and an active participation
10/28/2014 22:56:38	Helps to improve confidence and creativity. To know effectiveness of teamwork and better planning.

10/29/2014 13:43:12	I learned to work in a group, Delegate work. I also learned how to adjust with a large group of people. I learned to manage time.
10/29/2014 21:36:31	Team spirit, motivation, communication both verbal and non-verbal, time management, planning, resource management especially while renting costumes and properties, practise leads to perfection.
10/29/2014 19:59:33	I learnt a lot about team dynamics and the nuances of working collectively and collaboratively. I also learnt about the importance of punctuality, appropriateness in language, action and gestures.
10/29/2014 21:41:34	1.Team work in an effective way. 2.Co-ordination and confidence. 3. Inter-personnel and effective communication. 4.Giving opinions and feedback. 5.Etiquette 6.Knowing about costumes varieties and properties usage. 7.Planning about the play. 8.Budgets plan for the play.
10/29/2014 20:09:41	Team work, Coordination, Adaptability
10/29/2014 20:58:58	Team work. Planning is the essential part of anything. I never felt that I can speak lengthy dialogues. I developed my fluency pretty much with the help of this play.