Intercultural Communication between Colombian and North American Teachers at Colegio Bolivar

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Constant determination and devotion to detail are needed to communicate interculturally. Americans are not known for that type of attention in their interpersonal relationships, though that dedication is often given to their technical or work related tasks. On the other hand, Colombians will sacrifice other values in order to maintain harmony in their relationships. «Going around the tree» is greatly preferred to «Being direct.» At Colegio Bolivar, and at international schools all over the world, different cultures work out missions and goals to educate students. The working together is often a rocky process due to cross-cultural communication challenges. The entire community has to work at smooth, congenial intercultural communication.

The DELTAA Thesaurus simply defines Cross Cultural Communication as “Verbal and non-verbal communication among people of different cultures.” V. Lynn Tyler in *Intercultural Interacting* defines ethnocentrism, as «the concept that one’s own culture is of central importance and is a proper basis for judging other peoples and cultures.» (p. 28) When people of different cultures interact, they judge the customs and actions of the other culture based on their own. At Colegio Bolivar two cultures interact on a daily basis, Colombian and North American. The North American culture has people from both the US and Canadian, but for this essay, the foreign culture will be identified as American and generally refers to people from the US.

Edward T. Hall’s Culture Context Model identifies and compares High Context and Low Context Cultures. A High Context Culture has long lasting relationships, insiders and outsiders of the culture are clearly identified, there are spoken agreements, and cultural patterns are ingrained and are slow to change. Though what is said is important, the
context, that is, how and where it is said, is significant and gives meaning to what is said. (Cagle) Colombia is an example of a high context culture. Low Context Cultures have the characteristics of shorter relationships, they prefer written agreements, insiders and outsiders of the culture are less clearly identified, and cultural patterns change more quickly. What is said is less dependent on the context, that is, what is said is more important than how or when it is said. (Cagle) The US is a Low Context Culture.

At work a low context culture expects work before friendship, the earning of credibility through performance, formal agreements and efficient management of time. On the other hand, the high context culture expects to work in a cordial and congenial atmosphere, credibility is gotten due to the relationship, agreements are spoken and rituals surround aspects of business.¹ (Cagle)

The Handbook for Foreign Students and Scholars (section 3.4) of the University of Iowa identifies generalizations about the communicative style of Americans to which we can easily assent. When we compare Americans’ style with that of Colombians with Hamlet we declare, «There’s the rub.²» 1) In their informal chats, Americans choices for topics are the weather, sports, jobs, mutual acquaintances, and past experiences, especially those shared with the person they are with. On the other hand they avoid talking about topics they consider personal such as their income, age and how much they paid for something. Colombians often enter into topics of conversation, even with those they

¹ Hutchison has a section called Agreements and Contracts in his chapter «Doing Business with Colombians» which is helpful in demonstrating that Colombia is a high context culture.
² Hamlet III, 1, l. 73
know only casually, that seem personal to Americans such as people’s age, weight, salary and other specifics; they readily enter into discussions of politics and even topics that are particularly controversial such as drug trafficking, guerillas, corruption. (Hutchison, p. 93)

2) Americans prefer that their exchanges are comprised of short statements, alternating between speakers. Rituals, such as greeting, are kept to a minimum. Colombian Spanish is full of rituals. Saying hello is a lengthy exchange and might be repeated several times a day between the same people. (Hutchison, p. 81)

“¿Qué tal?” “¿Qué más?” “¿Cómo estás?” “¿Qué hay de nuevo?” are all ways of saying “What’s up?” and Colombians use them all, perhaps in the same exchange and do not really need or expect an answer. 3) Americans tend to try to support their opinions with facts and evidence. For Colombians, exact evidence and facts are much less important in informal exchange than maintaining a harmonious relationship and congenial conversation.

Comparing American values to Colombian values in the same areas we find other areas for possible conflict in the normal work situations found in a school.

1. **Colombians have a higher tolerance for ambiguity than Americans.** Colombians are ready to believe that there could be other possible explanations than the obvious. They can be very flexible when they see problems arise. They are tolerant of difficulties and interruptions to a schedule. Americans prefer exactness and do not like to deal with the unknown or to have their plans disturbed.

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3 Robert Kohls in his research for preparing foreign students for acculturation to the US has identified American values and much of the following information about US values comes from his work, “Values Americans Live By”.
2. **Colombians and American interpret differently how to help others.** Americans believe that helping someone means empowering them to help themselves. (Kohls, p. 3) Colombians approach offering help on a more direct, personal level. Helping someone is not necessarily seen as an opportunity to teach him or her, but to solve his or her immediate need.

3. **Americans have a compulsive time orientation compared to Colombians’ extended time.** Americans plan for and to a certain extent live for the future. They structure their lives around time and schedules. (Kohls, p. 2) Colombians have a flexible orientation towards time. (Hutchison, p. 78) They live in the present and the past and structure their lives around people much more than around time and schedules.

4. **Americans prefer directness in conversation and honesty at all costs, whereas Colombians hedge their conversations for the sake of relationships.** In their relationships and discussions Americans speak directly (Kohls, p. 5) and also allow for disagreement. They can “agree to disagree.” Colombians avoid giving a direct negative response when it would cause discomfort for the speaker or listener. (Hutchison, p. 76) Unanimity and harmony are valued.

6. **American’s have a stronger sense of ownership** (Althen, p. 131) **including control of their possessions, their ideas, their time and their personal space compared to Colombians.** Colombians are much more flexible in their sense of control over all these
things. Personal space is much less important, ownership of possessions and ideas is less guarded and time orientation is much less exact.

7. Americans prefer change (Kohls, p. 2) and newness; Colombians celebrate the past and prefer continuity to change.

8. Americans highly value practicality and efficiency where Colombians value harmony and congeniality. Americans prefer to finish tasks in as timely a fashion as possible, (Kohls, p. 5) regardless of the development of the relationships of those with whom they work. Colombians are very concerned that their relationships remain intact and congenial while they get tasks done. That tasks are done quickly is much less important than the congeniality of those who are working.

Looking at communication styles and values, there are many areas for possible conflicts in normal working situations. Here I will give only a very few examples of common interactions that can lead to difficulties.

Example 1: On a regular basis, Colombians and Americans work together in committees to complete tasks. For example, during our recent SACS review, bicultural committees were given assignments. The culture of the Americans in the group is such that they should arrive at the planned time and begin to work immediately. Their mode of communication is direct, with an eye on efficiency and based on provable facts. They want to receive and get credit for ideas and work and get the job done as well and as soon as possible. The Colombians are acclimated to our school and also tend to arrive
on time (often before the Americans). Their good breeding teaches them to find out how everyone is doing; Family or other personal information will be shared. The beginning of such a major project requires some ceremony; Elaborate plans will be made about how to get started. During the course of the work, if a Colombian disagrees with an idea, his or her opposing point of view will probably not be shared directly. However, the Colombian might ask questions confirming if the idea is a good one. Those questions are the hint that there is an opposing opinion. No direct confrontation may surface. For the Colombians, that the job is done quickly is not of such great importance; That everyone feels a part of the process and feels good about the work is of greater importance.

Possible negative outcomes from this committee work: The Americans can be seen as rushing the work, being insensitive to important family happenings that they were not interested in hearing about, insensitive to people feelings as they directly asked if people agreed and then blundered on even though others tried to indicate there were other opinions. The Colombians can be seen as not serious about work and talking at length about family issues, they beat around the bush (or go around the tree, as the idiom is in Spanish), they are more interested in how everyone is feeling than in getting the job done.

Example 2:
Two teachers are talking in the hallway. They have assumed a conversational pose and seem to be speaking intimately. A third person walks by. Should this third person greet the other two? The American culture would probably direct the third person to half
look at the couple speaking. If they initiate a greeting he or she would greet, if not, he or she wouldn't. The Colombian culture indicates that the third person should greet the other two.

Possible negative interpretations: In Colombia, saying hello and good by are important social rituals. Those who do not greet well are seen as poorly mannered and those who are not greeted may feel slighted or rejected. (Hutchison pp. 81-82) People expect to greet and be greeted even when they are engaged in conversation or working. Colombians greet each other every time they meet, not just once a day. It would be rude for the third person to walk by the other two without greeting them. From the American point of view, the third person could be seen as interpreting the other two, especially if the greeting turned into a 2 or 3 minute chat. Colombians often say that Americans “don’t greet.” As the American people are generally stereotyped as “friendly,” this might be seen as an odd criticism, but the Colombian custom of saying hello every time people meet makes American’s one “hello” per day rule some cold.

Example 3:

When a Colombian is complimented on his/her dress or a possession, he or she answers, “A la orden.” [It’s at your service.] An American who is complimented simply says, “Thank you.” Though the first is rarely practical, it is a warm way of responding. When entering a Colombian’s house, one is greeted by, “Estas en tu casa,” [You are in your own home.]
Possible negative interpretations: Colombians can be seen as acting impractically and Americans as being cold and impersonal.

As the world continues to shrink and communication between people of different cultures increases, it is necessary that all parties become sensitive to the challenges and follow through with those actions that can help ease the conflicts inherent in communicating cross culturally.

The informal conservation patterns of Americans make it very difficult for non-native speakers of English, or even for English speakers of non American English to understand American speech. Keeping conversations simple and direct will help increase communication. A website called Lateral Communications offers some very specific suggestions on their “Listening and Culture” page:
1. Keep language as unadorned and standard as possible. Figures of speech have hidden meanings and confuse second language learners. 2. Keep sentences short with subject, verb and object in close proximity. 3. Alternating speakers will offer opportunities to check on understanding. 4. The lack of understanding of certain rituals may lead to confusion about why a particular subject is being discussed. 5. Expect and be ready to correct misunderstandings.

If a speaker finds him/herself in a difficult intercultural conversation, especially one in which the “foreigner” is being asked to defend his/her native country, it is important to try to turn around the conversation and get the focus away from stereotypes and the history of a country’s wrongs. Try to avoid arguments and remain courteous even if the
tone of the conversations seems to be changing. (Tyler, p. 35) Realize that you may be misinterpreting what is going on as tone and attitude are culturally bound. If you are being criticized, disarm the speaker by turning the conversation using something positive from the critic’s country or agreeing with him/her. Be honest about your discomfort. (Tyler, p. 37).

Teachers new to Colombia, will initially have intercultural difficulties as they pass through the stages of Culture Shock. Information about confronting culture shock is readily available on the internet and is in several of the sources mentioned in the bibliography including Hutchison (pp.70-71) and Oberg. Some suggestions follow:

1) Acknowledge the feelings of alienation that are part of the second phase of Culture Shock, without judging oneself. The differences between host and native culture lead to feelings of discomfort, frustration, and inadequacy which cause the person to withdraw, lose motivation, be depressed, become homesick, angry, hostile, and to oversleep or overeat.

2) Find a sympathetic listener, but do not hang out with those who are very negative about the host culture. Developing a we/they attitude with negative expatriates will slow down the adjustment to the new culture.

3) Be sure to rest and sleep enough as stress uses more energy and being overtired will give fewer resources for dealing with the challenges of communicating in the new culture.

4) Stay in touch with family and friends. They can provide an anchor in the face of all the negative feelings. It is reassuring to be understood, after the frustrations of being misunderstood and feeling inadequate.
5) Learn as much as possible about the new culture and keep a positive attitude.

In his book, *The Handbook of Foreign Student Advising*, Gary Althen studied successful foreign student advisors and found that those who enjoy their work had the characteristics that make people better communicators. Those characteristics are intelligence, patience, nonjudgementalness, interest in cultural difference, respect for others, tolerance for ambiguity, sociability, self-awareness, and kindness. (Althen, pp. 31-40) Of course, not all people, or even all cultures have these characteristics, but those people who possess or develop them will find it easier to communicate with people of different cultures.

International schools, Colegio Bolivar included, benefit the communities they serve and provide a wonderful work setting for many North Americans. The difficulties intercultural communication causes are nothing compared to the advantages of teaching at such a school. Attention to cross cultural challenges can help all members of the community communicate better and provide an enriching experience for all.
Bibliography


A pithy summary of U.S. thought and U.S. institutions to aid the foreigner who wants or needs to understand why Americans are the way they are and do things the way they do.


Cagle, John A. Communication and Culture, a power point presentation. http://zimmer.csufresno.edu/~johnca/spch100/03culture.ppt June 5, 2004


A Case Study in Cross-Cultural Communication. A look at the Latin American’s customs, culture and thought especially from the point of view of a North American confronting a new culture. Typical scenarios of miscommunication are presented


This guide for foreigners coming to live in Colombia depicts Colombian customs and thought, give some history, and provides a practical guide for coming to, traveling in and settling in Colombia.

(on the internet: http://www.cs.uidaho.edu/~milosm/interesting/Values_Americans.htm)


A study of the customs and attitudes that a visitor or immigrant to the U.S. might benefit in knowing.


Analyzes intercultural interaction and also offers activities and thought provoking situations and questions to engage the reader or for the counselor to use in proactive situations.

University of Iowa, Handbook for Foreign Students and Scholars.