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Discovering Culture and Communication on the World Wide Web

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Discovering Culture and Communication on the World Wide Web

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ABSTRACT

Discussions of intercultural communication mostly center round the interaction of culture and communication concerning differences in values, beliefs, norms and communication styles. However, cultural differences also stem from different cognitive styles, which impact intercultural communication. This article describes an activity that introduces students to cultural cognition theory. Combining research on the Internet, small group interaction, and class discussion, this exercise encourages students to apply theory to practice, to explore cultural differences on the Internet, and to develop their critical thinking skills. It also develops their awareness and skills needed to be mindful of the nuances of cultural differences. The exercise is suitable for high-school or university-level communication courses that discuss cultural differences as part of their content.

Introduction

Discussions of cultural differences are found in many communication courses as well as in many social sciences disciplines. These discussions mostly center on the differences in values, beliefs, norms and communication styles. Cultural differences, however, also stem from different cognitive styles. The exercise described below allows students to investigate the relationship between cultural cognitive styles and effective communication. Specifically, it allows students to examine how cultural cognitive processes inform effective communication on the Web as well as how the ubiquitous World Wide Web may actually serve as a sociocultural environment that helps shape and sustain culturally specific cognitive processes. Pedagogically, this activity capitalizes on students’ interests in the Internet as well as the required laptop computer ownership of many campuses, and encourages them to explore on their own, to apply theory to practice, and to develop their critical thinking skills.

The objective of this activity is to give high school or college students insight into the connection between culture and communication on the Internet. The activity helps students understand the key concepts of holistic and analytic cognitive styles as well as high-context and low-context communication. If the students complete the activity successfully, they should have developed the skills needed to be mindful of the nuances of cultural differences.
Theoretical Background

Cultural perspective on cognition is a dramatic shift from the mainstream psychology of the 20th century, where “basic” cognitive processes are generally presumed to be the same among all human groups. According to cultural cognition theory, “[c]ulture exerts fundamental influences on basic psychological processes” (Lehman, Chiu, & Schaller, 2004, p. 695). Different values, beliefs, practices as well as different social and perceptual environments encourage significantly divergent attentional and cognitive capacities, resulting in normative standards for information processing, which differ across cultures (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001).

Cognitive style concerns the ways in which individuals consistently attend to, perceive, organize, and respond to stimuli. Cultural cognition theory proposes that there are two culturally specific cognitive styles: holistic cognition and analytic cognition. According to Nisbett and colleagues (Nisbett et al., 2001), an individual engaged in holistic cognition is oriented to the context as a whole, attends to relationships between a focal object and the background, and prefers explaining and predicting events on the basis of such relationships. In contrast, an individual engaged in analytic cognition detaches the object from its context, tends to focus on attributes of the object, and prefers using rules to explain and predict the object’s behavior. As holistic thinkers, East Asians tend to engage in context-dependent perceptual processes; their attention is oriented toward the field and to relationships between objects. North Americans, however, tend to engage in context-independent perceptual processes; as analytic thinkers, they decontextualize an object from the field and attend to its properties to establish category membership.

Nisbett and colleagues (Nisbett et al., 2001) reviewed a variety of studies supporting the theory. For example, in a study on attention, it was found that when Japanese and Americans were presented with scenes of fish and other underwater objects, and asked what they had seen, Japanese participants usually reported that they had seen a lake or pond whereas American participants usually reported that they had seen the focal fish. In a study on causal attribution, it was found that while Americans explained another person’s behavior predominantly in terms of traits, such as recklessness or kindness. Asian Indians explained comparable behaviors in terms of contextual factors, such as social roles, obligations, and the physical environment.

Evidence is found that culturally characteristic environments may afford distinctive patterns of allocating attention resources. According to Miyamoto, Nisbett and Masuda (2006), there exists a process of “mutual constitution of cognitive processes and sociocultural environment” (p. 118). Culturally specific websites should be an essential part of that sociocultural environment. While cultural cognitive styles inform web design, the outcomes of the design constitute part of culturally specific perceptual environment that shapes and sustains culturally specific cognitive styles. In this context, the activity enables students to observe how cultural cognition theory offers a unique approach to analyzing some of the most apparent cultural differences on the World Wide Web, a truly global medium.
Although the activity focuses on the Web, learning the theoretical underpinning will help students understand the differences in culturally specific cognitive styles. As cognitive style determines how an individual processes and responds to messages, the knowledge will increase students’ effectiveness of communicating with people of other cultures. The knowledge will also help students better understand culturally specific communication styles, such as high-context and low-context communication (Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2006).

**Intended Courses**

This activity has been successfully used in intercultural communication courses. It is appropriate for a variety of courses that discuss cultural differences as part of the course content, especially in international contexts, such as global studies, international business, business web design, etc. For a middle-school or high-school class, the theory references/discussion may be taken out in order to emphasize the diverse cultural practices in presenting and structuring information on the World Wide Web.

**Preparation for the Activity**

First of all, establish with students that they will be given a chance to browse familiar websites as well as to try some unfamiliar ones. Emphasize that they may not understand what the unfamiliar sites say due to language barriers but it should not be a problem because the real challenge is to focus on and compare the visual features of the sites. Then, review the basic concepts of cultural cognition theory with students (see Appendix A). Help students connect the ideas of the theory to the need to improve their ability of being sensitive to and mindful of cultural differences. Finally, distribute the handout (see Appendix B) and ask students to complete it, preferably pairing students if conducted in class.

**Conducting the Activity**

The activity works well if conducted during an 80-minute course session or two subsequent 50 minutes classes (without theory references/discussion, the activity may be done within 50 minutes), where students have their own laptops and wireless connections. (Students can also work outside of class if resources are limited in the classroom.) Tell students that they should choose comparable websites from two countries, such as top national news sites or the web sites of the largest public companies. Alternatively, they may select a multi-national corporation to examine its English version and a version targeted at another country, such as China.

After students are done with their examination, have the class discuss their findings in larger groups. Do a quick assessment of whether it would be better to assign students to groups by site type or randomly assign them to larger groups. Find out the number of students who
examine different types of web sites (e.g. national news sites, business sites or different versions of a multi-national corporation’s site). If each of the types is examined by enough number of students to make at least one larger group, assign students by site type. This could lead to discussion of whether different genres (news sites vs. business sites) make a difference in web page design or in the case of different versions of a multi-national corporation’s site, whether and how the corporation adapts its web page design to create a look and feel that appeals to the targeted audience.

Once the students are in groups, ask them to discuss their findings and come to conclusions. Then have groups report on their findings. Guide the students to process information on three levels, description, explanation and reflection. Ask the students to describe similarities and differences in the web page design, such as layout, use of imagery and animation, and explain possible reasons for the similarities and differences. Help the students apply the terms of holistic and analytic cognitive styles to their findings.

After the discussion, ask each student to reflect on how the activity helps sensitize them to various cultural markers on the Web. The instructor can point out the connections between learning a theory, observing the theory in action, and applying it to their own lives to communicate effectively with people of other cultural backgrounds online as well as offline. The instructor might also choose to emphasize that effective intercultural communication is more than having a common language. Students need to be mindful of and adaptive to other ways of information processing. Developing their skills in being observant to cultural variations around them and being respectful of cultural differences is a vital part of life skills, which courses in communication studies help them develop.

Limitations

When conducted in class, the activity might be less successful if network connection is very slow. Class size also has an impact on the effectiveness and relative student involvement with the activity.

References

Appendix A

PowerPoint Outline for
Discovering Culture and Communication on the World Wide Web

Key Concepts
• Culture and systems of thought
  o Holistic thought – “involving an orientation to the context or field as a whole, including attention to relationships between a focal object and the field, and a preference for explaining and predicting events on the basis of such relationships”
  o Analytic thought – “involving detachment of the object from its context, a tendency to focus on attributes of the object to assign it to categories, and a preference for using rules about the categories to explain and predict the object's behavior”
• East and West differences
  o People of East Asian cultures tend to engage in context-dependent cognitive processes and to perceive and think about the environment in a holistic way.
  o People of Western cultures tend to engage in context-independent cognitive processes and to perceive and think about the environment in an analytic way.
• Attention and perceptual environment
  o Culturally specific patterns of attention may be afforded by the perceptual environment of each culture.

Asking Questions
• Is the World Wide Web a culturally specific perceptual environment, which helps shape and sustain culturally specific cognitive processes? Or
• Is there an emerging trans-cultural web style, which results in a universal look and feel on web sites across cultures?

Finding Answers
• Do the exercise (Appendix B) and discuss findings.
Appendix B

Student Handout
Culture and the World Wide Web

Go online to [http://www.abyznewslinks.com](http://www.abyznewslinks.com), select a U.S. national news site, such as CNN.com or MSNBC.com, and then select a national news site from another country, preferably an Eastern country, such as China or Japan. Alternatively, you may go to [http://www.forbes.com/forbes2000](http://www.forbes.com/forbes2000), which lists the world’s largest companies, and select two companies from the same industry, one being a U.S. company and the other being a company from another culture, preferably from the East (such as Taiwan, South Korea, etc.). Or you may select a multi-national corporation and find two versions of its web site, one in English and the other in another language.

Be observant! Pay close attention to details! Examine the use of imagery and animation, as well as the layout on the page. Answer the following questions:

1) For each page, make a list of characteristics that catch your attention. Compare to see whether they are similar or different on the two pages? (This item asks students to jot down visual features that compare or contrast the selected pages. For example, students may notice that Chinese pages use more imagery and that Chinese pages are divided into many independent spaces while on U.S. pages, the layout is arranged around a focal point of the page.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>U.S. web page</th>
<th>Other Culture’s web page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imagery</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layout</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2) What evidence have you found that supports (or rejects) the hypothesis that culturally specific patterns of attention may be afforded by the perceptual environment of that culture?

___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

3) With regard to the World Wide Web as a global medium, what does your discovery answer the questions of whether it is a culturally characteristic perceptual environment or whether there is an emerging web style that transcends cultural boundaries?

___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

4) What issues arise with regard to making web communication more effective across cultures?

___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

5) How do your findings in this exercise shed light on strategies for effective communication between you and people of other cultural background?

___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________