38. VISUAL COMMUNICATION PATTERNS

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In this activity participants investigate different communication styles by analyzing and trying on a communication pattern, which may challenge assumptions that speaking the same language is the most important aspect of intercultural communication. This game leads to negotiating meaning in communication styles and can lead to a deeper conversation on the values that determine specific cultural patterns of communication.

Key Focus

Communicate successfully

Type of Activity

Exercise

Objectives

As a result of this activity, participants will

- recognize there are differences in cultural communication styles (e.g., direct and indirect),
- understand that by examining communication styles of themselves and others they may be able to recognize communication barriers,
- realize that shifting communication styles is a challenge, and
- understand that intercultural communication involves more than speaking the same language.

Appropriate Audience

Adults, teenagers

Level of Challenge

Low

Group Size

10 to 40

Time

15 to 30 minutes

Materials

- Handout
- Blackboard, whiteboard, or flip chart that is large enough for everyone to see

Preparation

Handout S6.4 has five communication patterns on it. Each group will receive one of these five communication patterns. Make one copy of the handout if you have five groups and two copies if you have between 5 and 10 groups. More than one group can have the same communication pattern. Cut out each of the five communication patterns.

Activity Setup

1. Have participants form groups of two to four.
2. Ideally, have these groups sitting at separate tables. They do not need any writing materials.
3. Write on your whiteboard or other surface: Visual Communication Pattern. Tell participants that each group will receive an image that represents a communication style. Instruct participants to look at the image with their group and describe what the communication pattern or style is. At this point, you can either tell the group that they will eventually be asked to communicate effectively using this communication style, or you can let the groups discover this themselves in a few minutes.

4. Distribute one communication pattern image per group. Draw attention to the black dot in each image: This represents the topic or main point of what is being communicated. Make sure they understand that they are trying to identify the style of communication that revolves around the main point. Allow 5 to 10 minutes for groups to analyze and describe the pattern of communication. For example, the circle with a dot in the center may be described as when the speaker never identifies the point explicitly, and it looks like talking in a circle or around the point (depending on the intercultural knowledge of the group, they may identify this as an indirect or high-context communication style, but they can use any manner to explain how the speaker is dealing with the point, e.g., talking around it, etc.).

5. Circulate and ask questions to help prompt each group's thinking, as needed. For example, if the group is looking at the spiral the facilitator might ask, "If the point is at the bottom, what kind of information might the speaker begin with and continue with until reaching the end point of this communication style?"

6. Stop the groups and give them a topic to apply the image's pattern to. The topic should be relevant (e.g., marketing for a business group), not necessarily have a definitive answer (e.g., how to launch a new product), and one they are sufficiently knowledgeable about to start the analysis. Tell the groups they will need to use the communication style represented by their image to tell the rest of the group about the topic—and emphasize that their goal is to use this style effectively.

7. While groups are working, circulate and offer guidance. Participants may benefit from questions such as: "Given your image, how might you start the discussion and how might you get to the point about pollution?"

Managing the Activity

After 5 to 10 minutes of planning their communication, stop the participants. Ask one group to show their communication pattern image to the rest of the participants. Draw a larger version on the board and ask the group to talk about the point or topic using the visual to guide their communication style, while others listen and watch. Ask the group to explain what its visual communication style required (e.g., start on the topic, then go off on a tangent, then come back to the topic, etc.).

Continue this process until all groups have shown their images and talked about the selected topic using their assigned communication pattern. Note that when two groups have the same communication pattern, they may have different interpretations of the pattern and use it differently. This is okay and will create a good discussion in the debrief.

Debriefing the Activity

After all groups have spoken, ask the following debriefing questions:

- What was it like participating in this activity?
- What was easy or difficult? Why?
- How difficult was it to figure out the communication pattern? (Allow for examples.)
- How difficult was it to figure out how to apply the pattern to the topic? (Allow for discussion.)
- What does this mean for communicating with people whose communication style may not be the same as our own?
- What does this tell us about the assumption that having the same language does or doesn't mean effective communication is a given?
- Do any of these ways of communication say something about how we (Canadians, Americans, etc.) perceive time (or another cultural value)?
- Ask for experiences from participants who speak more than one language: Do they notice a shift in the pattern of communicating when speaking a different language? This may also include more body language, silence, and so forth. How did they learn to shift their communication for the new language group? And, what questions remain about another group's communication style?
- Which style do you relate to or would best describe your communication style? How can you adapt your style specifically to others' styles? Give a concrete example of adaptation. (This adaptation question is a very important one, so be sure to spend adequate time exploring responses.)

- Have participants draw a picture that represents how they think their cultural group tends to communicate. (You may need to give a specific context, such as making a presentation.)
- What cross-cultural lessons can you take and apply from this activity?

Depending on the group, there may be an opportunity to ask participants to apply intercultural theory to the visuals, for example, high/low context, direct/indirect, building a relationship before getting down to business.

Key Insights and Learnings

- Words alone may not be enough to overcome an intercultural communication challenge.
- Understanding that various patterns of communication exist may help one to stop and consider that this is the reason for a miscommunication.
- Shifting communication styles is not a simple task. This could build empathy for those working with different cultures and when the language in use is not the speaker's first language.
- Depending on the participants' background, a deeper look at the underlying values for communication styles could emerge: Cultural values can be reflected in communication styles (e.g., North Americans tend to be linear and direct, which could be linked to individualism and values of time, while collectivists tend to be more high context and indirect, take time to build relationships, don't need specific words because of shared knowledge or history, etc.).

Variations

Variation 1. Reveal the visual communication pattern of each group only after group members have spoken using their style. See if the rest of the group can guess what style they were demonstrating. Then have the group reveal its visual and explain how group members tried to use it.

Variation 2. One person from each style group could form a new group and have the conversation in his or her prescribed communication style. The listeners guess what the communication pattern might

be and respond to the ease or challenge of being in such an interaction as a speaker and as a listener.

Variation 3. At the end of the activity, have participants draw a visual on their name tags (if used) that represents their own style.

Facilitation Tips and Suggestions

- Keep the activity moving.
- Be prepared to acknowledge a communication style is from your perspective. Invite people from different language groups to draw an image representing their interpretation of what communicating in English is like.
- The ambiguity may frustrate some. Remind participants these communication patterns are subject to interpretation, and this is an exercise in trying on another communication style to understand where communication challenges may originate.
- It is likely that participants will rightly identify that communication preferences or patterns are not only cultural but also personality driven.
- Wherever possible, use the participants' comments to recognize the challenges in trying to understand the complexity of intercultural communication. Point out that although we are all speaking the same language, there are other aspects to communication that affect understanding the message.
- As this is an experiential activity, more time may be necessary to allow for empathy building. Experience has shown that the best conversations around communication differences have happened when there has been some challenge in negotiating how to do something. Check participants for too much stress or frustration.
- Note that the use of the phrase *What's the point?* is linguistically and culturally loaded. Participants from other language or cultural groups may need to use a different term.
- Have a visual that represents your perception of your culture's communication style (see Figure S6.5). For example: "This horizontal line illustrates that I start with my point or focus. Attached to the top line is a vertical line that represents all the things I may say connected to this first point (e.g., I may give examples, provide the rationale for my first

point, etc.). The second horizontal line illustrates that I am finished talking about this point and often represents the conclusion I may end with." Note that this visual is based on giving a presentation in English in a Canadian academic context.

Notes regarding the visual representations of communication shown in Handout S6.4a:

1. The first visual is a spiral that starts very broadly and eventually gets to the point. This could represent taking time to get to know someone instead of getting down to business. This model could represent an Asian or aboriginal value of setting the context or building a relationship before discussing the topic of the conversation. It may also indicate a need to establish one's credibility on the topic prior to getting to the point, as with some European groups and Russians. (Note: This visual came from a Russian student of mine, and an Italian student identified with it as well).

2. The second visual is the circle with the dot in the center. This indicates a high context communication style where the point doesn't have to be identified because the information around the point is enough, and the participants share that unspoken information. It could also be viewed as indirect communication. In both cases, the listener has to work to figure out the point as opposed to being given all the words and details. This can be seen with Japanese and some other Asian communication styles.

3. The third visual begins with a focused message, then presents the same information four different ways prior to getting back to the point. This can be perceived as repetition without apparent reason. The final completion does not have to be a summary or even relate to the previous details. This has been self-selected by some of my Chinese students to represent their common style of communication.

4. The fourth visual is a switchback, a curved or flowing line punctuated with different points (A, B, C, etc.) indicating that the message is not linear and can be interrupted. The curvy line that appears to go off topic has been
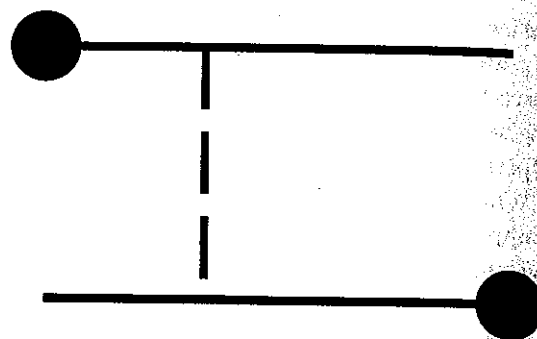

FIGURE S6.5   Example of Communication Style

identified by some Hispanic students who state they spend more time telling the story, which can allow for spontaneously adding other information. This may connect to a polychronic sense of time and message, as opposed to a direct, one idea at a time style.

5. The fifth visual illustrates three separate but related threads of the communication that come together at the end of the message. In this instance, the receiver has to do some work to understand the communication. While not necessarily high context, it is not as direct as a typical linear style of communication (e.g., as is common in Canada and the United States, among other places). One may consider it being similar to poetry, fables, or parables. This communication pattern was one that a Japanese student of mine identified as being most like their communication style.

About This Exercise

This exercise has evolved from my classroom struggles to find a way to help students understand the required style of writing in an academic class. It comes from my research using visuals to analyze English and other languages' communication styles, which was inspired by a student in *Writing Across Borders* (2005), a film by Wayne Robertson at Oregon State University. It also builds on Robert Kaplan's (2001) visuals, although it does not match any visual with any particular culture. The exercise was first used in 2008. Three of the visual representations in this task were produced by my students, and the interpretations are based on their conversations as well as faculty development sessions cofacilitated with Kyra Garson of Thompson Rivers University (TRU). The exercise has been used with intercultural groups of students,

faculty, and staff at TRU and other faculty development sessions in other Canadian universities. The aim for students is to help them understand a communication pattern to emulate, which has been met with much success as it does not diminish the students' primary communication pattern; rather it enhances their understanding of behavioral shift for intercultural communication. In terms of faculty development, it has been used as a tool to build empathy. When experientially challenged with shifting our own preferred learned style of communication, faculty have a stronger understanding of what they are expecting other cultural groups to be able to do. The task itself can be frustrating for one who does not shift easily.

REFERENCES

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