Transcending Cultural Differences in Global Settings

Virtual Worlds Best Practices in Education

March 20, 2015 / 8:00 AM SLT

Presentation Abstract

Title: “Transcending Cultural Differences in Global Settings”
Facilitator: Steven R. Van Hook, PhD / Kip Roffo (Second Life)
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Time: 8 AM PDT
Location: Idahonia Sim

Presentation Abstract:
Educators of international students are frequently challenged with a clashing diversity of cultures in a global classroom. This study examined what sorts of themes and images might resonate across nationalities and cultures, which could then be used to ease the way for students and educators in international classes. The study findings indicate applied themes and images including babies/children, animals, relationships, sports, life cycles, and self-image may help evoke a positive transcultural resonance for a common base of shared experience. The findings were used to consider instructional applications for more effective learning in international classroom settings, as well as identify hazards posed from misapplication of transcultural tools.

Presenter Biography:
Steven R. Van Hook has worked in international education, news media, economic development, and social services for more than twenty years, with positions in Oregon, California, Washington D.C., Moscow, and Kiev. He has served with social and economic development programs including VISTA, Head Start, and the United States Agency for International Development. He has a doctorate specializing in transcultural learning, and has developed courses and seminars in cross-cultural communications and global relations for universities in the United States and Eastern Europe. He has been a television news anchor, newspaper columnist, radio talk-show host, and managed a television bureau in Russia during the final months of the USSR. He teaches cross-cultural communication courses at UCLA and elsewhere. His research was recently published by UNESCO: http://wwmr.us/support/transculturalism.pdf
This is a presentation on Transcending Cultural Differences in Global Settings, delivered by Steven R. Van Hook for the Virtual Worlds Best Practices in Education on March 20, 2015.

I became interested in cross-cultural management and communication when I was working in Russia as a TV bureau chief. The differences between Russian and American cultures helped contrast the stark diversity between us. This led to my master’s and doctoral research in culture studies.
Slide 3

**Cultural Theorists**

- Geert Hofstede
- Marieke De Mooij
- Fons Trompenaars
- Edward T. Hall
- Barbara Mueller
- Simon Anholt
- Samuel P. Huntington
- Lawrence E. Harrison
- Erin Meyer

Text:
Here are some key theorists in cultural research. But rather than how different we are, the more interesting question to me is: how do we get beyond those differences?

Slide 4

**Who Should Care?**

- International educators and students
- Global business managers
- Mass media
- Residents of culturally diverse nations, states, cities

Text:
Effective cross-cultural relations are especially important to international educators and students; global business managers; mass and social media publishers; residents of culturally diverse nations, states, and cities.
Text:
The book *Global Work: Bridging Distance, Culture & Time* says 21st century leaders in the worldwide marketplace need to develop cross-cultural skills and supporting technologies to manage and communicate effectively with diverse and dispersed cultural backgrounds.

**Slide 6**

**The Problem**

- Teachers in international courses are frequently unable to accommodate the wide range of cultural variations among a growing diversity of international students.

(Adam, 2003; Pinheiro, 2001; Engberg & Green, 2002)

Text:
Teachers are often befuddled on how to teach a room full of international and culturally diverse students, clustered according to their nationality, and not interacting as a unified group of classmates.
The question is: how do we gather a group of culturally diverse people in an international setting, and try to get beyond our differences, reaching together towards a common purpose?

It is a challenge to conduct a study of this type requiring a suitable group of culturally diverse participants, comfortable with the research process, exposed to a wide range of themes and images, with consistent and replicable observations.
A course in global advertising for an international program at the University of California provided the study participants and content. Over the initial study, hundreds of different students representing diverse countries and cultures were exposed to tens-of-thousands of total impressions of commercials with many varied themes and images.

Commercials provided an effective medium since they are brief packets of information, demographically resonant, with a wide variety of themes and images, in a medium universally familiar to the study participants.
Some important terms to consider are ‘cross-cultural’ relations *between* cultures; and ‘transculturalism’ which goes above and beyond cultural differences. ‘Resonance’ can be achieved with a sympathetic vibration; and ‘dissonance’ creates disagreement and discord.

The study sought to identify transcultural positive resonance through clips that received high mean score and low variance from the international participants. A larger variance in responses would indicate a dissonant reaction.
Articles on this research have been published in scholarly journals including UNESCO’s Prospects, and Sage’s Journal of Research in International Education. These and other related articles are published on my research website at http://wwmr.us

The study included a wide range of countries and cultural diversity, and an even split between participating males and females.
Diverse cultures of Asia, Europe, the Americas were well represented in the study.

Wide cultural diversity was strongly represented by participants Italy, Japan, Germany, Brazil …
### Country Origin of Researcher’s International Students
**UCSB / UCLA / CLU International Programs / 2001 - 2010**

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**Transcultural Messages:**

**What Doesn’t Work Well**

- Humor
- Sex
- Religion
- Politics

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**Text:**

Topics that might create dissonance in a multicultural room include humor, sex, religion, and politics (or nationalism).
Slide 19

Humor Group

Group Classification: Neutral Dissonance

\[ n = 235 \]
\[ \bar{x} = 4.5 \]
\[ \text{Median} = 5.0 \]
\[ \text{VAR} = 3.3 \]
\[ \Sigma x = 1060 \]
\[ p < .001 \]

Text:
Humor and jokes are often deeply rooted in a cultural context, so the message may well be lost on others from a different country – even if they understand all the words used.

Slide 20

Sex Group

Group Classification: Neutral Resonance

\[ n = 141 \]
\[ \bar{x} = 4.5 \]
\[ \text{Median} = 5.0 \]
\[ \text{VAR} = 2.3 \]
\[ \Sigma x = 632 \]
\[ p < .001 \]

Text:
There are considerable cultural differences in the expressions of sexuality.
Slide 21

Religions Group

Group Classification: Neutral Resonance

- $n = 141$
- $\bar{x} = 4.1$
- Median = 4.0
- VAR = 2.3
- $\Sigma x = 580$
- $p < .001$

Text:
Wars are sometimes waged over differences in religious beliefs.

Slide 22

Nationalism Group

Group Classification: Neutral Dissonance

- $n = 141$
- $\bar{x} = 4.7$
- Median = 5.0
- VAR = 3.4
- $\Sigma x = 667$
- $p < .001$

Text:
Messages with a nationalist angle can create a high level of dissonance in a room, especially if nations and cultures are pitted against one another.
Text:
Transcultural themes and images may be easy to predict by those who work with international students or groups. This study provides the data to quantify and qualify the tactics.

Video: Summary and examples of culturally resonant clips (6:25) http://youtu.be/6yKwBbm-Uk
Video: Longer overview of transcultural study (16:55) http://howtoteach.us/vanhook5.htm
Babies and children were the top ranked transculturally resonant theme in the study. If you are ever at a United Nations meeting where the old diplomats are battling, bring out the baby pictures of grandchildren and see if it changes the mood.

Next to babies, the participants ranked the animal clips highly. International students often say they miss their pets back home more than their families. Some of them may be indifferent to animals, but that is more of a personal than cultural reaction.
International students found the relationship clips engaging, but were often more interested in the examples that showed conflicts in the relations rather than sweetness.

The high ranking of sports clips was surprising. I was expecting a dissonant nationalist reaction to sports, but instead found the students typically appreciated excellence and team spirit ... even beyond national, cultural and demographic boundaries.
Self-image was a tricky theme to categorize … but there was a transcultural interest in how other peoples see themselves, and a curiosity to see another culture as outsiders looking in.

Life cycles: We’re born, we live, we die … for now, something everyone shares in common.
The selected water clips didn’t pass the cutoff for transcultural resonance, mostly due to confounding variables within a clip. But during qualitative interviews, the water images clearly appealed to the students beyond cultural differences.

Discussions of food and eating habits seem to transcend cultural differences.
There also appears to be a transcultural interest in musical rhythms between cultures.

There seems to be a transcultural interest in possible life forms on other worlds, based on my college presentation series on the topic.
Transcultural tactics in global classrooms can contribute to international student comfort, bonding, integration, content relevancy, and holding their attention.

Here are some examples of transcultural tactics applied to a university course in Global Economics:
Slide 37

**Babies/Children: Socioeconomic costs of war**

A Palestinian boy waits to be treated after Israeli missiles struck Gaza city on May 15, 2004.

Sarah Haider, a wounded eight-year-old Iraqi girl, sits in a hospital bed after her house was destroyed in an overnight US air strike, which killed both her parents, in Najaf, May 12, 2004.

"They have to be carefully taught" 📻

**Text:**
The socioeconomic costs of war can be effectively transculturally illustrated by showing the suffering of children.

Slide 38

**Animals: The Globalization of the Family Cow**

- The need for the family cow squeezed by refrigeration.
- Holsteins – the "SUV" of dairy milkers – are now the globalized cow breed.

**Text:**
Transculturally appealing animals can be used to explain how changes in farming practices transformed economic development.
Slide 39

Self-Image: The Masai Aesthetic

"In the Masai language, the word for physical appearance (which roughly translates as a person’s "goodness") can also be used to describe their morality."

"When I asked the Masai about what constitutes a perfectly good-looking person, their answers frequently included friendly, well respected, disciplined, and brave."

"The Masai typically think about attractiveness in terms of both physical attributes and character traits alike."

Robert Biswas-Diener

Text:
The self-image transcultural tool can illustrate differing moral perspectives with a case study on the Masai aesthetic, where they describe someone’s physical appearance in terms of their ‘goodness’

Slide 40

Relationships:

“Nash’s Equilibrium” (27-page dissertation)


A Beautiful Mind
By Sylvia Nasar
Universal Pictures 2001

Text:
A movie video clip from A Beautiful Mind demonstrates the principle of group and individual interests in social gain, by using an illustration of men and women interacting at a nightclub.
Slide 41

Sports: Daytona 500 demonstrates complexity theory and social networking.

- In aerodynamically intense stock-car races like the Daytona 500, the drivers form into multi-car draft lines to gain extra speed. A driver who does not enter a draft line (slipstream) will lose. Once in a line, a driver must attract a drafting partner in order to break out and try to get further ahead. Thus the effort to win leads to ever-shifting patterns of cooperation and competition among rivals. This provides a curious laboratory for several social science theories.

Text:
The dynamics of social networking and complexity theory can be demonstrated by the principle of racecar drafting.

Slide 42

Life-Cycles: Discussion Topics

- **Unemployment rate:** Is it high or low in your country? Does the government provide unemployment insurance? What does someone in your country do when they lose a job?
- **Military:** Is service mandatory in your country? Do they offer benefits and incentives for service? Is military spending a big part of your economy?
- **Education:** Who pays the largest part for education in your country? Private or public funds? Who should pay? Is there financial aid? How important is education to economic development?
- **Health care:** How much does a visit to the doctor cost? A stay in the hospital? Who pays? Private or government funds? Who should pay? Do you have private insurance companies? Is health care regulated? Should it be?
- **Family planning:** What is happening with the birth rate in your country? Are people getting married later? Do you think the current state of the economy in your country is helping or hurting families? How? Has this impacted your own plans for marriage and a family?

Text:
Discussion board topics for international online courses can feature transculturally resonant life-cycle themes such as employment, education, health care, family planning.
Slide 43

Teaching Ideals

Kerckoff Hall
UCLA (University of California at Los Angeles)

Korean Students from Hanyang University

Text:
On-ground and face-to-face learning may long remain the ideal learning environment, especially as it brings together and shares cultural diversity.

Slide 44

Immersive Technologies

Immersive headset company Oculus VR bought for $2-billion by Facebook in 2014

“Imagine ... studying in a classroom of students and teachers all over the world or consulting with a doctor face-to-face, just by putting on goggles in your home.”
~ Mark Zuckerberg

Text:
However new virtual technologies will bring ever larger and more diverse groups of the world’s people together.
Slide 45

Educare Virtual Learning Centers

Free college courses, English read-along books, videos, career development, transfer credit possible through Saylor Academy.

Sakura Learning Center by Educare Research on Imzadi Island
Non-profit 501(c)(3)

Text:
The Educare Learning Centers in Second Life provide transculturally resonant learning resources.

Slide 46

Educare Research inc

- Non-profit educational think tank in USA
- Resources for international educators
- Instructor materials
- LMS learning platform access & links
- Educator and student support and references

http://educares.net

Text:
Educare Research inc (ERi) provides free learning resources supporting international educators and students: http://educares.net
You can get a PDF file of this presentation at http://wwmr.us/support/transculture-VWBPE.pdf

My dissertation on themes and images that transcend cultural differences is posted at http://wwmr.us
Questions? Comments?

Steven R. Van Hook / Kip Roffo

- University of California
  Language, Culture
  & Business Programs

- Educare Research Inc
  Nonprofit International
  Educational Resources

- Second Life: Educare
  Learning Centers

- http://educares.net
- http://wwmr.us
- steven@wwmr.us

Text:
Feel free to email me with comments and questions: steven@wwmr.us