THE SCIENCE CIRCLE

THE FUTURE OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT CURRENT SUBJECT

The Science Circle presents:

Title: “Transcending Culture in International Settings”
Facilitator: Steven R. Van Hook, PhD / Kip Roffo (Second Life)
When: Saturday September 20
Time: 9 AM PDT
Location: Lecture Hall
Voice/Text: Both

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.

SL/Science Circle:
Steve Van Hook / Kip Roffo will present on ways to connect with diverse cultures using themes and images that transcend cultural differences. The presentation will use voice, along with video and practical examples of how transcultural tactics can be applied in real and virtual global settings. He has worked with international programs in education and government, at universities in the USA and Eastern Europe. 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 International Settings, delivered by Steven R. Van Hook for the Science Circle on 9/20/14.

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.
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?

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.
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.

**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)
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.
Text:
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.

Text:
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 ...
### Slide 17

**Country Origin of Researcher's International Students**  
UCSB / UCLA / CUJ International Programs / 2001 - 2010

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Country</th>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Text:
... South Korea, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey.

### Slide 18

**Transcultural Messages:**

#### What Doesn't Work Well
- Humor
- Sex
- Religion
- Politics

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

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

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

Slide 22

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.
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/6yKNwBbm-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.
Slide 31

Water Group

Group Classification: Neutral Resonance

\[ n = 165 \]
\[ \bar{x} = 4.4 \]
\[ \text{Median} = 5.0 \]
\[ \text{VAR} = 1.8 \]
\[ \Sigma x = 734 \]
\[ p < .001 \]

Text:
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.

Slide 32

Food

Text:
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 19, 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.

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

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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.
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’

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

However new virtual technologies will bring ever larger and more diverse groups of the world’s people together.
The Educare Learning Centers in Second Life provide transculturally resonant learning resources.

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

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