

# Communication Teacher



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## Touchstone Award

### **Production, Performance, and Portfolios: A Final Project for Diverse Learning Styles**

**Objective:** To complete a final course project that incorporates kinesthetic, auditory, and visual learning styles.

**Course:** Intercultural

Diversity has become an important component in many communication courses. Nowhere is that component more apparent than in the intercultural communication course. Although instructors may focus on the incorporation, understanding, and appreciation of diversity in course content, diversity often is not reflected in the assessment of the material taught in this course. Because students have multiple learning styles (Manner, 2001; Park, 2000), the purpose of this activity is to help instructors incorporate diversity into their assessment of intercultural communication course material. The three options provided in this activity incorporate three learning styles: kinesthetic, auditory, and visual. *Kinesthetic learners* learn best through experience. *Auditory learners* learn best through hearing (e.g., listening to lectures). *Visual learners* learn best through seeing (e.g., reading textbooks).

#### **The Activity**

This activity provides students with the opportunity to use the medium of communication with which they are most comfortable when completing a final project for the intercultural communication course. Simultaneously, this activity provides the instructor with the tools to assess students' understanding of the course material. Listed below are the options for the final project. When incorporating this activity into a 16 week semester, students must select their final course project option by Week 6. Project presentations occur during Weeks 14-16.

**Option 1: Video Documentary.** For this option, stu-

dents create a 20-30 minute video documentary on some aspect of intercultural communication. Students can conduct on-the-spot interviews with people about an intercultural communication issue or they can tell a story about an intercultural communication issue through video scenes. Students should be informed that this assignment is not a video of a performance, but a video of a story created from scenes and events they will videotape. Students should be encouraged to incorporate their own voice into the video as narrator (i.e., clearly explaining to the audience the particular intercultural communication issues that were videotaped). The video should be presented in a fairly professional manner. Although students are not expected to produce a PBS quality video, there should be evidence of editing rather than simply turning the camera on and off. (Students are expected to use basic editing by hooking two VCRs together and recording segments from the roughly shot tape onto a second tape.) Students should be sure that (1) the video tells a story, (2) the story is easy for the audience to follow, and (3) the story is no longer than 15 minutes. Once the video is completed, students write a 4 page paper relating the issues addressed in the video. Students are required to have three references for this paper. (Only one reference can be the course textbook and only one reference can be obtained from the Internet.) This final project option engages all three learning styles: kinesthetic

#### **IN THIS ISSUE**

Production, Performance, and Portfolios: A Final Project for Diverse Learning Styles . . .	1
Effectively Approaching the First Day of Class . . . . .	3
Who's Responsible? . . . . .	5
Applying Levels of Measurement to Super Bowl Advertisements . . . . .	6
Image, Public Speaking, and The John Rocker Press Conference . . . . .	7
Understanding Dialectical Tensions through Radio Call-in Programs . . . . .	9
The Power of the Image: Helping Students Understand Visual Images and Messages . . . . .	10
The Intercultural Travel Memo . . . . .	13

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## The Intercultural Travel Memo

**Objective:** To apply Hall's (1976) and Hofstede's (1997) cultural categories to a simulated communication situation.

**Course:** Intercultural, Organizational

The Intercultural Travel Memo is an applied assignment in which students prepare a hypothetical 3-5 page (single spaced) memo for a supervisor who will be traveling abroad for business. Although the purpose of the supervisor's trip is not relevant to the assignment (i.e., students do not need to know anything about marketing or public relations), what is relevant is that students are able to utilize concepts of communication and culture to prepare a memo outlining features of effective communication in a different culture.

### The Activity

Before students can write their Intercultural Travel Memo, the instructor must first cover some relevant intercultural communication concepts. For this assignment, the concepts developed by two scholars are used. The first concept is high/low context (Hall, 1976). *High context cultures* are characterized by situation- and relationship-based communication cues. In high context situations, much of what a participant communicates is unspoken or relationally based (e.g., employees know or think that they know exactly what their supervisors want). In *low context cultures*, communication is driven by what is actually spoken or written. Participants from low context cultures "say what they mean" and rely on written documents and formal agreements. When individuals from a low context culture are uncertain about what someone else means, they ask a question.

The remaining five concepts were developed by Hofstede (1997) and consist of uncertainty avoidance, individualism, masculinity, power distance, and Confucian dynamism.

*Uncertainty avoidance* refers to an individual's tolerance for ambiguity. In high uncertainty avoidance cultures,

there are more written rules and regulations, a belief in experts and specialization, and a fear of outsiders. In low uncertainty avoidance cultures individuals are more comfortable with ambiguity and believe that if rules and laws are not working well, they should be changed. *Individualism* refers to how collectivistic the members of a culture are. In high individualism cultures, people care more about themselves, their professional success, and holding positions of power. In low individualism cultures, people value family and group membership and harmony above their own interests. *Masculinity* examines the value placed on things (or possessions), power, and assertiveness, as well as the distribution of tasks across a culture. In feminine cultures, less gender segregation occurs, with both men and women participating equally in work and family roles. In masculine cultures, greater gender segregation exists in family and work occupations. *Power distance* refers to the perceived difference between a superior and a subordinate in society as experienced by the less powerful in society (e.g., child/parent, employee/supervisor, student/teacher). In high power distance cultures, individuals may hesitate to express their opinions to supervisors. In low power distance cultures, individuals often feel more comfortable approaching individuals in positions of power. *Confucian dynamism* refers to issues of thrift, perseverance, and the desire for orderly relationships with others. In cultures with high Confucian values, individuals who are extravagant and unpredictable are seen as threatening to the social order. Adapting traditions to modern contexts and conformity is emphasized. Low Confucian cultures value individualism, accept individual differences, and embrace change.

Using the table found in Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988, pp. 58-59), students are each assigned a country and directed to write a memo on communication and culture for their supervisor to use on a business trip. Students then receive the following assignment sheet:

You work in a medium sized organization that wants to break into the lucrative international market in (country name). A potential (country name) client has asked your supervisor to visit their country and make a proposal. The potential client is a family-owned business and is considered quite powerful in their home country. You must create a societal and cultural communication summary to help your supervisor prepare for the trip to (country name). Your supervisor, a 44 year-old woman, will meet with the top executives of the organization. She has appointments scheduled with a senior male manager (age 58), a junior female manager (a daughter of the owner who is in her early 30s), and a Ph.D. (whose age and sex are not known, but is considered to exert influence with the family). As your supervisor prepares for her presentation, she asks you to prepare some culture specific communication information to help her win the client.

When completing this assignment, focus on these three aspects of your assigned country's society and culture:

1. Features of the country. These features include (a) the exchange rate (i.e., how much of their money is equal to \$1 U.S.); (b) transportation issues (e.g., which side of the road is driven on, access to public transportation); (c) geography, climate, and

geopolitical location; (d) racial, ethnic, and religious tensions; (e) significant social and political issues; (f) major imports and exports; and (g) areas of special cultural pride.

2. Communication concepts. These concepts include high/low context, uncertainty avoidance, individualism, masculinity, power distance, and Confucian dynamism.

3. Business etiquette issues. These issues include (a) how to behave upon first meeting others from that culture (e.g., handshake, kiss, bow, wai); (b) issues specifically related to the relationship of the participants involved in the meetings (e.g., marital/family status, social status, age, sex, education); (c) appropriate topics of conversation during the first meeting; (d) the role (if any) alcohol plays in the culture; (e) food expectations (e.g., aroma, taste, who should pay); (f) cultural norms (e.g., gift giving, tipping); (g) norms of chronemics and proxemics; and (h) social faux pas (e.g., things that should never be said or done).

Students are directed to complete this activity in memo form, using bulleted lists and section headings. By requiring students to write in memo form, students are forced to pay special attention to organizing the memo in a clear and easy to follow fashion. Students are directed to organize the memo using "section headings," "introductions," and "bulleted lists," so the memo can be quickly referenced by their supervisor. [Information on memo writing can be found in Newsom and Carrell (2001) or at [www.Montclair.edu/Pages/CommStudies/Kent/Index.htm](http://www.Montclair.edu/Pages/CommStudies/Kent/Index.htm)]. Additionally, students are directed to review 2-3 academic sources (i.e., journal articles, books), consult 2-3 texts on business etiquette/travel, and visit tourist Web sites maintained by the country.

The memo is due the sixth week of class and students are instructed to turn in two copies. One copy submitted is in a single-spaced, memo form; the other copy submitted is double-spaced to facilitate instructor ease in editing.

### Debriefing

The Intercultural Travel Memo works well to stimulate student discussion on intercultural issues. Once all the memos have been submitted, the instructor may ask questions about Hall's and Hofstede's cultural categories to reinforce the purpose of the activity. Some questions include:

1. With what cultural dimension of Hofstede's does Hall's concept of high and low context correlate?

2. With which three verbal/nonverbal communication strategies should a visitor to your culture become familiar? (high/low context)

3. Now that your supervisor has established a relationship (or began establishing a relationship) with the company officials, what is the next communication step for her to take to help minimize uncertainty? (uncertainty avoidance)

4. How appropriate is it for your supervisor to ask the senior manager to make a decision without consulting others? (individualism)

5. What difference did it make that your supervisor was a woman? (masculinity)

6. What role does status (e.g., title, age) play in your cul-

ture? (power distance)

7. Given your country's score on Confucianism, how quickly might you expect the company to move on your proposal? (Confucian dynamism)

8. What was the most difficult aspect of your country's culture to explain to someone who is unfamiliar with the culture?

### Appraisal

The Intercultural Travel Memo is worth 20% of the course grade. Memo grades are evaluated according to three criteria: (1) adherence to college level writing standards (i.e., final draft quality copy of memo, no typing or spelling errors, use of proper grammar), (2) the extent to which the memo meets the "minimum" requirements for the assignment (i.e., two copies of the memo submitted, with one copy single- and one copy double-spaced; 3-5 single-spaced pages in length, written in memo form; the inclusion of a references list with the 4-6 required references), and (3) an evaluation of the thoroughness and usefulness of the student's treatment of the three required sections of the memo (i.e., features of the country, communication concepts of Hall and Hofstede, business etiquette). All three sections are weighted equally.

The Intercultural Travel Memo has proven to be an excellent way to get students thinking about the value of theory in understanding culture and communication. The Intercultural Travel Memo can utilize almost any set of cultural theories. For example, Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's value orientations (Samovar & Porter, 2001) might be used so students can conduct a more critical analysis focusing on human nature, cosmology, and relationships. Alternatives to the Memo approach include (1) having students prepare a memo covering nonverbal communication issues associated with context, sex differences, or gestures or (2) having students apply Hofstede's categories as part of an essay examining a culture and describing, with examples and citations, how each category affects everyday situations (e.g., a dinner, business negotiation, informal lunch).

One drawback of this activity, however, is the memo approach itself. The memos often require a lot of editing and feedback so students capture both the tone utilized in a memo and the content required by the supervisor to communicate effectively. Additional limitations include students often merely restating Hofstede's definitions of each category and failing to adequately compare the cultural practices of their nations to American cultural practices. Students also have difficulty relating each concept to a lay audience. That is, students write as if other individuals have read Hall's and Hofstede's works and understand concepts of communication and culture. Instructors must reinforce how important it is for students to put "theory" into everyday language for lay audiences. But whatever assignment approach is selected, our experience has been that The Intercultural Travel Memo is an excellent way to raise students' awareness of communication and culture.

### References and Suggested Readings

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for administrivia. The best way to accomplish this task is by providing a course syllabus (Friedrich & Cooper, 1999). The syllabus should specify the number of assignments, the number of quizzes and tests, the points (or percentage) for each assignment, and the course grading criteria. You should provide your office location, your telephone number, and if applicable, your e-mail address. Identify required textbooks and any additional course materials (Padgett & Schultz, 1979).

*Immerse students in course content.* According to Friedrich and Cooper (1999), there are at least two issues related to course coverage that students like to have addressed during the first class session. These issues are (1) What will the course cover? and (2) How will this course relate to other coursework? Following a discussion of course objectives, Eisele (1989) explained that it is important to get students interested in learning the course content beginning on the first day. To get students interested in the course, an instructor can play an audiotape,

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### Effectively Approaching the First Day of Class

Continued from page 3