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A New Direction: Internationalizing Communication Programs

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INTRODUCTION

Despite the best efforts of the International Communication Association to internationalize the discipline of communication, the field of speech communication remains mostly American culture-bound. Although these organizations have focused our attention on

international issues by holding conventions outside the US, as well as identifying international communication topics for convention programs and journals, our teaching and research still remain mostly ethnocentric. For example, in interpersonal communication classes we focus on developing skills for American based interpersonal relationships. Persuasion classes provide theoretical underpinnings for compliance techniques that succeed within an American culture but would prove disruptive in an Asian culture, for example. Our research in interpersonal communication is based almost exclusively on American college sophomores. Studies in organizational communication are usually based on perceptions of American workers.

In the recent past, the programs, courses, and research projects conducted at the School of Interpersonal Communication ("INCO") at Ohio University were no exception. This article describes a successful effort to expand an already strong program to include a focus on international education as well.

BACKGROUND

With the founding of Ohio University in 1804, and classes beginning in 1808, the first courses in what was later to become "INCO" were offered. Logic, persuasion, and rhetoric were three of the major and early oral communication study areas. The current school was predated by elocution courses in 1888, a School of Oratory in 1912 (re-named the Department of Public Speaking in 1917), the Department of Speech and Dramatic Arts in 1930, and the School of Dramatic Art and Speech in 1947. Finally, with the forming of the College of Communication in 1967, the current School of Interpersonal Communication came into being. As an example of its long rhetorical tradition, in 1992 the School celebrated 100 years of forensic activity at the university.

According to Paul Boase, first Director of the School, the name "Interpersonal Communication" was chosen to distinguish the department from mass communication. Since it was to be housed in a College of Communication some adjective had to be added to the word "Communication." "The struggle to find a modifier or even another name for Public Address dragged on for more than a year. Group, human, behavioral, oral, and even speech communication fell by the wayside." Finally, Paul Boase suggested the name "Interpersonal Communication" and it was accepted by the faculty and administration.

Faculty and staff encountered no small amount of joshing from their colleagues on campus and even at national meetings about this strange new name. When interpersonal caught fire as a popular research/teaching area and later became a division of ICA, some less knowledgeable people gave Ohio University credit for initiating research in interpersonal communication. Actually, INCO did not offer a course in that area until over ten years later when Dr. Sue Dewine, the present Director, joined INCO and persuaded the faculty to submit such a course to the curriculum committee" (Boase & Carlson, 1989).

Today, the School of Interpersonal Communication enjoys a comfortable presence in the College of Communication housed with the Schools of Telecommunication, Journalism, Communication Systems Management, and Visual Communication. INCO is afforded benefits because the program handles the largest number of service credits in the college and one of the largest in the entire university. INCO is also seen as more "liberal arts" oriented when compared to the other professional schools in the college. As a result, the school's Promotion and Tenure criteria are viewed as some of the most rigorous within the college, particularly with regard to research productivity. At the same time, because we are grouped with professional schools who have high equipment needs, we often receive state and university money allocated to colleges to purchase and maintain such equipment and services. Under other circumstances, we might not be eligible for such funding. In short, being in a College of Communication has provided significant advantages for the school.

The success of the INCO program has been its balance between the undergraduate and graduate programs; between traditional and ground breaking areas of study and between teaching and research for faculty. First, our balance between undergraduate service courses and the graduate program is critical to our survival. The focus on undergraduate education is our central role in the life of the university. INCO serves most of the undergraduate students through the basic communication courses. While these courses are not university-wide requirements, they are required of most major programs in the university. The public speaking course is taught by our 35 graduate teaching associates while an additional 40 graduate students have funding from other units on campus or outside support.

With nearly 500 undergraduate majors, the school offers six programs: organizational communication, legal communication, communication in human services, political communication, communication theory, and speech education. By far the largest major is organizational communication with 278 majors, with legal communication and human services communication numbering about 50-75 majors each. As with many communication programs around the country, the school is healthy in terms of both majors and service credit hours. We are able to offer a large number of undergraduate courses because of the high number of teaching associates. Our undergraduate and graduate programs are interdependent.

Second, we have tried hard to maintain a balance between traditional courses and lines of research, and ground-breaking research. Our history is soundly based in traditional rhetorical and communication courses. Such courses will always remain an important part of the school's offerings. At the same time we have hired additional faculty whose research interests include communication and technology, applied organizational communication, family and gender research, interpretive research methods, development communication, and American studies. Our graduate students appear to be blending various areas of research to a greater extent today than ever before. Upon graduation the positions our graduate students will fill will demand that they are able to cross invisible boundaries in our field and teach a variety of courses. We believe this balance among the various interests of the faculty will prepare them to do so. Our placement rate for recent graduates of nearly 100% would seem to support our convictions.

Third, an instructional load policy implemented in 1988 and incorporated into our P&T document in 1994 maintains a balance between teaching and research which allows faculty to specialize in areas in which they are best prepared. This policy allows faculty to follow a teacher/scholar model with time for research or a teacher/professional model with 100% of time devoted to teaching. Evaluation is then weighted by the percent of time spent in any activity. With a large graduate program the balance between the number of faculty who choose a teaching/scholarship combination and those who choose full teaching ends up being about 75% in the teacher/scholar model and 25% in the teacher/professional model. This allows us to continue to maintain a significant focus on both teaching and research.

In 1988 the School moved into a newly renovated building that housed all faculty (22), TAs (35), and staff (5) and included three classrooms, a computer lab, forensics practice room and meeting space, small conference/meeting room, research lab, and faculty lounge. The university acquired funds to renovate the building and INCO solicited donations from alumni to furnish rooms and decorate the lobby in its original turn-of-the-century style and decor. We have also been successful in acquiring space in a building next door that previously had been used for non-instructional purposes. Five additional classrooms have been renovated, three offices (for at least 3 additional faculty who will be added next year) and a large lecture/training auditorium for our exclusive use with raised seats, holding 90+ students. This was accomplished through lobbying for space on several important university committees, appealing to major gift committee members, and making students aware of our serious space restrictions which prevented us from adding students to classes scheduled in rooms that held

small numbers of students.

In spite of all these positive attributes, INCO has lagged behind other units within a university structure where international education is highly valued. Our President of 19 years, Dr. Charles Ping, did more for internationalizing Ohio University than any other single individual. Ohio University boasts the largest percentage of international students of any state institution in Ohio; 1,128 international students from 101 different countries, or 6% of our student population, come from outside the US (Boyd, 1994). In addition, over the past decade Ohio University has developed joint educational programs in Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, Hong Kong, Japan, Malaysia, Philippines, China, Taiwan, Guyana, Thailand, Australia, France, Hungary, Russia, and Scotland, as well as over 100 different student exchange programs (Gagliano, 1994).

INTERNATIONALIZATION

As recently as five years ago the School of Interpersonal Communication had few international students and no international programs. Today we have graduate students from China, Malaysia, Bangkok, Bangladesh, India, Columbia, Costa Rico, Taiwan and Norway. We hired an international scholar (Dr. Arvind Singhal) who conducts research and consults in India, Hong Kong, Egypt, China, Bangladesh, and Norway, to name a few. Since Dr. Singhal's addition to the program, three other faculty members have become involved in international scholarship and have traveled around the world to study and teach development communication and organizational communication. In addition, we participate in three international programs in Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Bangkok.

These changes in our student population and increased involvement in international programs came about because of a commitment to international education on the part of the faculty. The benefits from having international students in our classes, having international teaching associates teaching for us, and having faculty members travel to other countries to teach are significant. The remainder of this article will focus on one particular program which has had the most significant impact on our program, our new PhD joint program with Bangkok University.

In the Spring of 1992 we were approached by Dr. Thanu Kulachoi, President of Bangkok University, to explore the possibility of starting a joint Ph.D. program at that institution. In the fall of 1994 the first INCO faculty member spent 16 weeks in Bangkok teaching the first class of Ph.D. students. What follows is a description of how this program was implemented and what we have learned so far about its potential impact on our own students, faculty, and school.

From the beginning of our discussions, three significant benefits became clear. First, the potential for faculty development was most obvious. Until faculty members actually study and live in another culture they cannot acquire a deep understanding of the cultural differences of their students. Living in a country, rather than just visiting it, is ideal. To bring that rich experience into the classroom was very desirable.

The second most obvious benefit was the funding this program would provide for international projects. With the income from this project we have been able to support graduate students who want to conduct research outside the US, fund travel for faculty members to international conferences, and support faculty development projects that would not be possible without funding beyond state support.

Third, this particular program involves having the Bangkok students attend classes on the Athens campus the second year; consequently, all of our students and faculty will have the benefit of interacting with these individuals. These interactions with Bangkok students will inform our understanding of intercultural communication, and we will see first hand how well our American based theories translate.

Those were the expected results. It is the unexpected lessons that have made this program so meaningful. As Dr. Judith Lee, our first faculty member in residence, put it:

> What does it feel like to re-learn all the codes for communicating? Some aspects are fun—the challenge of the new, the novelty of travel; . . .but some are upsetting. For instance, Thailand is a country where even some of the nonverbal codes are different from ours. People smile when they are angry, laugh when you are physically hurt or when expressing dissatisfaction. How does a Westerner avoid being confused or insulted in such circumstances? Here's an example: Today I picked up my three-year-old daughter from her pre-school. That's a pretty difficult job since it's really too close for a taxi (about one mile of miscellaneous one-way streets that take longer to drive than to walk), but it's still pretty hot for walking and there are few usable sidewalks for pushing a stroller. So I trudge along, sweating, straining to keep the stroller level, spinning my head around to watch for motorcycles, etc., when I hit a pothole in the sidewalk and send her sprawling. She cries, and I comfort her. Half a dozen people are watching, and they all laugh or smile. A difficult moment (Lee, 1994).

What we learn about nonverbal codes increases our sensitivity to a variety of possible interpretations. It is equally good for American scholars to experience being unfamiliar with verbal codes.

> I have also learned what it feels like to be illiterate. Since Thai uses a non-Roman alphabet based on Sanskrit, I haven't been able to apply the decoding skills that have made me fairly proficient in other languages. Instead of reading alphabetic messages, I have to read the pictures on packages — sometimes incorrectly — when I go shopping. My Thai teacher assumes that reading Thai is a lower-order necessity than speaking — that's not surprising, since McLuhan and Ong would say that Thailand, despite the spread of literacy, is really still an oral-aural culture (Lee, 1994).

Language and communication have always been a main component in our curriculum. This type of close exposure to language differences serves as a valuable laboratory for instructional development. Imagine how these experiences will influence Dr. Lee's lectures the next time she teaches communication theory! Meanwhile she is composing a conference paper on how the communication theories of Walter Ong and Marshall McLuhan can explain some of the features of Thai communication and culture. And she is working with students from the Bangkok program on a conference panel aimed at sharing their perspectives on the relevance of western rhetorical theories to the Asian context.

We have also learned to transfer the lessons we learn to the American culture as well. While I was teaching in Asia, I had my two children with me. A friend and her son joined us as well. We stayed in a family suite which was quite large and comfortable. However, the manager informed us several days into our stay that we had one too many people staying in the room and we would have to reduce the number of people in that room or rent a second room. My friend and I do a great deal of consulting on conflict and mediation and were prepared to go into a negotiation session with the management. Fortunately, my Hong Kong students cautioned us not to do that. Instead, they suggested that I talk with the manager each day, smile, express understanding of the conflict, and say we were working on resolving the problem and then do nothing!! They also suggested that we should indicate that we were

having a difficult time identifying which child to send away! So, every morning I would dutifully go down to the main office to talk with the manager. I would smile, nod my head, express our concern about the problem, say that we were working on a solution, but were having a difficult time deciding which child to send away. I would express my hope that we could come to some resolution soon, smile, and leave. We never did anything about the problem, and they never pressed us for a solution.

The principle in operation was "saving face." My students knew when I mentioned we would choose to send one of the children away that the manager would not press us to do so; however, we did not want to make management admit that they had "backed down." Thus, we helped the management save face by suggesting that we were continuing to work on the problem. I have since encountered a number of opportunities when that approach worked quite well in the American culture, too!

We learned from major mishaps with the program. From now on we will send textbooks with each faculty member as extra baggage. Having texts mailed from U.S. publishers and getting them through customs at the other end is difficult. We are pleased that we thought to assign a full time research assistant to the faculty member although the faculty member has not really had time to do research because her time has been taken up mostly with administrative chores. Therefore, we have adjusted the faculty member's load to include two units of teaching and one unit of administration instead of a unit of research for the period of time that a faculty member is in Bangkok. We have also learned that there are many overhead costs that you simply cannot anticipate; in the future we will include some "general" costs in the contract. Such costs include very expensive mailings, buying textbooks for students when they are unable to get them for themselves, and extraordinary living expenses beyond what is normally allowed.

Finally, I believe you must be very sensitive to your institution's attitude and support for international programs. In our institution there has been great enthusiasm for such programs. That emphasis by top level leaders on international education may have provided the initial encouragement we needed. However, we have now been affected forever by our involvement so that whatever degree of top-level support exists there will be a sensitivity to international issues within our school. For example, two faculty members have founded international scholarships (Dr. Ray Wagner's International Student Scholarship to support scholars in INCO; Mr. Chuck Carlson's funding of in international internship) and the school has funded graduate student international research awards. These are long-term commitments to internationalizing our curriculum and students.

Since we are a state supported institution, we must be very careful not to use resources allocated by the citizens of Ohio to help pay for the education of a group of international students. At the same time, these international experiences will result in great benefits to our undergraduate students. In a world where international trade and relations are increasing in importance (especially for Asia), the benefits of an internationally aware and competent faculty offer many subtle benefits to the undergraduates who will need to find their own place in the global marketplace. Consequently, there are direct benefits to the State of Ohio as well!

Given an environment that recognizes and supports international activities, participating in international educational programs can generate benefits which are multifaceted and far ranging for your faculty, your program, your university, and ultimately the field of communication as a whole. The discipline of communication will always be culture bound to a significant degree, but we can certainly makes those boundaries permeable.

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