

Communication for Global Business: Some Pedagogical Imperatives

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The latest phase of globalization, brought about mainly by the democratisation of technology on a scale that was unimaginable even a quarter-century ago, emboldens ordinary managers and entrepreneurs in emerging economies also to enter global business. One of the crucial areas in which the MBA curriculum should prepare students entering the new world of business is intercultural communication. They have to be helped to refine their cultural intelligence so that they can communicate effectively with potential suppliers, customers, and co-workers from any part of the world. That most of their intercultural communication will be virtual makes it extremely challenging. Several pedagogical steps are suggested to help students develop cultural sensitivity.

In the 150th anniversary of the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, it is instructive to recall a deep insight that is almost universally misattributed to him: 'It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.' Although this statement comes from Clarence Darrow (1988), this statement is in line with Darwin's claim about the survival of the fittest. We need to study the implications of this insight because we see a species we are intimately connected with and have high stakes in – the Indian MBA – struggling with a massive change, namely, globalization, affecting lives and businesses everywhere. While the members of this species need several skillsets, we shall confine ourselves to the communication skills and strategies that they need to hone in order not only to survive but also to thrive in the new environment.

Here is what we will attempt in this paper. First, we shall take a quick look at globalization. What does it mean? Why has it become so important now for our MBAs? Next, we shall identify the main communication challenges it poses to the MBAs we produce now. And finally, we shall explore some curricular possibilities

targeted at helping the MBAs cope with communication challenges in the globalized era.

Globalization

The essence of globalization is integration and interdependence of people scattered across the globe. It is characterized by "the export and import of goods and services, international capital mobility, labour mobility, and technical knowledge across national borders" (Freeman, 2008, p. 687). Although globalization is driven mainly by trade, it affects countries politically and culturally too.

Globalization is not at all a new phenomenon. As Andre Frank and Barry Gills (1992) and Frank (1998) argue, globalization started at least 5000 years ago with the Orient as the moving force behind world trade almost until the 18th century. There is a far more widely promoted and adopted Eurocentric view (e.g. Wallerstein, 1974) that true globalization started about 500 years ago with the European discovery of America and the creation of the various European empires through the process of colonization, and was strengthened by American and European multinational corporations in the 19th and 20th centuries.

While these are expert views of economists, sociologists, and historians, most people tend to look upon globalization as a recent phenomenon. They tend to consider it a triumph of capitalism and free-market philosophy, a process that evolved during the last 50 years, especially the last 20 with Russia, China, and India joining the global trading system in a big way, lowering the barriers to the free flow of goods and services across country borders, and thus creating “a single economic world based on capitalism and markets” (Freeman, 2008, p. 687). The accelerated pace of globalization in the last two decades is reflected in the way the value of cross-border world trade has gone up since 1990, when it was around 15% of total global GDP; it is now some 20%; McKinsey & Company estimates that it will go up to 30% by 2015 (Globalization, 2009).

The latest phase of globalization is something people across the world have seen and touched; it is not an esoteric concept that they have read about in academic journals or heard discussed at international conferences of economists. It has provoked a conflicting array of responses from the rich and the poor hailing from different parts of the world, from the far left and from the ultra right: outright condemnation, fulsome praise, nagging fear, and grudging acceptance. Whether one likes it or not, whether one thinks it fair or not, it appears to be an unstoppable process. The interdependence has grown so heavy that no country, however powerful, can afford to step aside. For example, the US – the richest and most powerful country on earth – depends on China to get out of the current financial meltdown; and China’s economy will be ruined if the US economy collapses.

If globalization is a 5000-year-old process, why is it that it has suddenly burst upon everyone’s consciousness? Over the last 5000 years, the process has been gathering momentum. Science and technology is at the heart of its progress. For millennia traders depended on animals for travel and transportation, which severely restricted their scope in all respects. Intercontinental trade received a boost from the development of ships that could cross the oceans carrying hundreds of people and thousands of tons of goods including arms and ammunition. The invention and development of each new technology contributed to the momentum. The accelerated growth of science and technology in Europe from the 16th century

onwards also was reflected in the expansion of intercontinental trade dominated by European countries. But the old globalization directly involved only a small minority of people in different parts of the world. These were initially the royals and the super rich, and later multinational corporations based in the US and Europe. Through expensive technology, which was not available to the rest of the world, they controlled resources and trade.

The 20th-century multinational corporations along with Western governments and international institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund were controlling global trade and molding policies in many countries to suit their capitalist and free-market agenda. The three largest emerging economies – the Soviet Union, China, and India – resisted them up till the 1970s.

The New Phase Of Globalization

In the last two decades, however, there has been a remarkable change. Multinational corporate giants are still around and powerful, but there has been a co-occurrence of democratization of technology, especially information technology and communication technology, and a severe shortage in the West of people willing to do hard work with low pay. In search of high returns, Western capital started flowing to countries with low wages and rich natural as well as human resources. Globalization has thus touched people everywhere directly or indirectly through outsourcing, offshoring, export of commodities, and import of manufactured goods. Interdependence and integration of the economies of different countries have reached a new high. *The Economist* (Globalization and trade, 2009) explains this interdependence with a simple illustration: “[A] tractor made in America would once have been made from American steel and parts.... Now, it may contain steel from India, and be stamped and pressed in Mexico, before being sold abroad. As a result, changes in demand in one country now affect not just the domestic economy but also the trade flows and economies of several countries.”

China, India, Russia, and Brazil are now contributing to the direction and pace of the process of integration. Although the claim that now “the world is flat” and that the latest stage of globalization, “Globalization 3.0,” has created a level-playing field for everyone (Friedman 2005) is a gross exaggeration, as Zakaria (2005) and Bass (2005) among several others (for example, Ritzer, 2007) point out, there has been an unmistakable change.

The Western hegemony is still in place like a well-supplied, unassailable castle on top of a steep hill. Americans and Europeans well ensconced there still make the rules to protect their interests and to prolong their domination. They will continue to do so for at least another quarter-century although there are research-backed predictions now that China's economy will occupy the top slot by 2027 and will become twice as big as the American one by 2050 (see Jacques, 2009). Even if such predictions fall short of the targets, various developments including the democratization of technology and General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) have made it possible for a few brave souls from the rest of the world to consider crossing the moat and scaling the wall with a realistic hope of entering the castle some day.

It is well known that globalization has hit skilled and unskilled manual workers hard in both the rich and the emerging economies and raised unemployment. The story, however, is different for knowledge workers. Marc Andreessen, a co-founder of Netscape, told Friedman (2005, p. 70), "... today, the most profound thing to me is the fact that a fourteen-year-old in Romania or Bangalore or the Soviet Union or Vietnam has all the information, all the tools, all the software easily available to apply knowledge however they want." In a similar vein, Nandan Nilekani also told him (Friedman, 2005, p.7), that there was now "a platform where intellectual work, intellectual capital, could be delivered from anywhere. It could be disaggregated, delivered, distributed, produced and put back together again – and this gave a whole new degree of freedom to the way we do work, especially work of an intellectual nature." It is interesting that both of these successful entrepreneurs are speaking about intellectual work and pointing to the windfall that knowledge workers have received in the latest phase of globalization. Our MBAs are among those who will benefit from globalization. They can create companies. Outsourcing of processes and services by the rich and the not so rich world to those countries that can provide them at lower costs and greater efficiency is growing in spite of the global recession and rising protectionism in the rich countries including the US. This means that a large number of our MBAs will have to work with foreigners without leaving their hometown.

The phenomenal growth of Internet has given everyone a chance to draw attention to themselves in a way that was impossible even 10 years ago. With the right product and approach, you don't need to be rich, powerful, or

famous to set up shop there and attract the world's attention. For example, information about many budget hotels, lodges, and guesthouses in different parts of the world inaccessible through travel agents are now readily available to googlers everywhere. There is no business now that is too small to be global. Size doesn't matter now as it did in the past.

The emerging message is clear. You no longer need to have impossibly deep pockets or privileged birth to start a multinational corporation. If you have a brilliant idea, you can start what Friedman calls "a micro multinational" (Pearlman, 2005). And several people with brilliant ideas have started doing precisely that riding the Internet freeway although it is generally at the low end of the value chain. In this context a statistic, although from the US, is illuminating. According to the US Small Business Administration, says Varian (2005), "small businesses represent 99.7 percent of all firms, they create more than half of the private nonfarm gross domestic product, and they create 60 to 80 percent of the net new jobs." The MBAs are likely to join small but global companies or start their own global operations.

Implications For Indian MBAs

What are the implications of this new phase of globalization for Indian MBAs? The main implication is that their entire orientation has to change for them to manage in a world with lowered barriers, in a world where competition and collaboration can come from any corner. They have to think global and develop knowledge, attitudes, skills, and strategies required for managing business globally. Here, however, we shall restrict our discussion to communication-related issues.

The business world they enter is no longer purely domestic; it is global. If they choose to get into business that is purely local or domestic, they may severely restrict their career development. Even if a company is owned and run by fellow Indians, and most of its operations are conducted domestically, managers will probably have to interact with at least a few foreigners as potential suppliers or customers or both in order to survive competition. Even if face-to-face interactions are not required, it will be difficult to avoid engaging foreigners altogether in the course of one's work.

If they join a large company, they may have to report to, work with, or manage people with different cultural orientations. They may need to travel to other countries or communicate with them through electronic channels such as e-mail, videoconference, and teleconference. They may also need to communicate informally through

chatting, instant messaging, and other means that may be developed in the coming years when virtual teams spanning different continents will be common. The challenge is to influence others and get things done through culturally appropriate communication.

If they become entrepreneurs, they may have to be prepared to reach out to people in other countries, other cultures, and get them interested in new products and services. They will find that taking a purely local approach to business development might be suicidal especially when they have inherent disadvantages belonging as they do to a developing country. Trade barriers having gone down during the last few years, several foreign goods and services have been dislodging their homegrown counterparts in India. One does not need to go beyond the neighborhood to see a flood of Chinese goods on shop shelves even in small towns and villages. Foreign ownership is increasingly being observed in a wide range of services including Telecom and mass media especially cable and television entertainment. It appears that even the education sector will soon be open to foreign universities and other institutions of higher learning. Poor communication ought not to let down an entrepreneur who has spotted an opportunity to sell goods and services within the country and abroad.

The Communication Challenge Facing New MBAs

The challenge in all this is that there will continue to be cultural barriers affecting the way people communicate even if financial interdependence and integration make the world flatter and more accessible. Cultural barriers will not disappear along with trade barriers because it is in the nature of human beings to form local and regional communities with shared values different from those of others. If the MBAs want to succeed, they must learn to communicate appropriately with people in a variety of cultural contexts. They may need to “multicommunicate” (Turner & Reinsch, 2007) simultaneously with colleagues at different levels and belonging to different cultures. Yet it is not practical for them to learn about cultural values in every part of the world and shape one’s communication strategies accordingly. Nor can they predict whether the foreigners they have to communicate with will be from Norway or Nicaragua. Long lists of do’s and don’ts for preventing gaffes in each cultural context may not be dependable because such lists are most likely to consist of stereotypes. Besides, how many lists will one

carry around to deal with people from many different cultures? So managers need to develop ‘cultural intelligence’ rather than carry lists of do’s and don’ts.

What is cultural intelligence? How does one develop it? Cultural intelligence is the same as “intercultural competence” which manifests itself, according to Bennett and Bennett (2004, p.149) in an appropriate intercultural mindset and skillset. They go on to explain that people with the right intercultural mindset will have some conscious knowledge of their own culture and some mental framework for dealing empathetically with variations in other cultures, for making generalizations without stereotyping others. And those who have the right intercultural skillset, that is, the ability to adapt themselves to the cultural contexts without abandoning their own cultural moorings, will be able to “analyze interaction, predict misunderstanding, and fashion adaptive behavior” (p.149).

Bennett and Bennett (2004, pp. 151-152) make a useful distinction between cultural generalizations and stereotypes, and recommend generalizations as a starting point for interaction with people from other cultures. Cultural generalizations, they add, refer to predominant tendencies among groups of people; they are based on systematic cross-cultural research rather than on an individual’s experience with a few members of another culture. (See, for example, Gudykunst, 2003; Hofstede, 2001; and Trompenaars, 1993).

An example of a generalization at a higher level of abstraction is that people in Western cultures tend to be more ‘individualistic’ than people in eastern cultures, who tend to be more ‘collectivist.’ ‘Power distance’ is another feature along which different cultures vary significantly. Cultural generalizations do not apply to any given individuals belonging to a group; they act as tentative initial hypotheses to guide interaction with individuals of that group. Stereotypes, on the other hand, are over-generalizations based on one’s or others’ necessarily limited personal experience. Some stereotypes are handed down for generations and adopted with no scrutiny at all at any level.

The insidious problem in cross-cultural communication is the uncritical, unquestioned assumption that one’s thinking framework and one’s culturally imbibed values are right and universal. One may not at all anticipate any other ways of dealing with issues, or one may think of other proposed approaches as weird, and then become frustrated at the unexpected response (or indeed no response) from others. As Gupta &

Govindarajan (2002) say, developing a “global mindset” is rendered difficult if one is not conscious of the cognitive filters that make up one’s existing mindset. Similarly, one may not even anticipate that others may have a problem with one’s attitudes or approaches. As Edward Hall (1959, quoted by Jameson, 2007, p. 199) observed in *The silent language*, “culture hides much more than it reveals, and . . . it hides most effectively from its own participants.”

It is this under-the-skin character of our own culture that drives our response when we are faced with unfamiliar settings. We interpret the rest of the world through a cultural filter that we are not even aware of. Some of us may be more circumspect than others and respond after looking around to see what others are doing. Some of us never notice that others are doing things differently from us. That shows poor cultural intelligence.

Students who do their MBA without having had a rich intercultural experience (this is true of a large number of students, especially fresh graduates, at local and regional level business schools), have to be helped in particular to develop intercultural competence. It is not enough to throw in a couple of sessions on intercultural communication. The entire MBA programme should promote the development of cultural intelligence. But we shall focus here on the way communication courses can contribute.

Developing Intercultural Competence: Curricular Interventions

Extensive pedagogical advice for developing intercultural competence is available for people who want to go into another culture and work there. See, for example, Landis, Bennett, & Bennett (2004) for an excellent collection of training ideas and resources. While such advice is very useful and it confirms the special challenge involved in communicating across cultures, conscious efforts at developing cultural sensitivity can also lead to what can be called ‘misdirected mutual adjustment’. An Indian, for instance, learns a great deal about Russian cultural values, and adapts her behavior to a large extent to be acceptable to the Russians she encounters. Her behavior, instead, upsets and disorients the Russians who have learnt all about Indian culture and have been making an effort to adapt themselves to the Indian’s behavior. The Indian also is similarly disoriented and dissatisfied with the encounter because neither party meets the other party’s expectations about how they should behave.

Sokuvitz (2002, p.61) describes the experience of a Chinese-American, who was born and brought up in the US. He was frustrated by the way others communicated with him because they assumed that he was Chinese because of his looks and expected him to behave like one. Others expected him to be quiet and reserved like a typical Chinese but he was effusive and outgoing. This made the others question his credibility. Others were trying to communicate with him as if he was a typical Chinese and he wanted to be treated as a mainstream American. Others’ attempts to adjust themselves to what they perceived as his Chinese-ness managed only to irritate him.

Thus developing appropriate cultural sensitivity is far from simple. Knowledge about a culture does not automatically lead to successful communication with people from that culture, says Yuan (1997, cited by Jameson, 2007, p. 202) because it is individuals who communicate not cultures. Besides, country- or culture-specific investment in training is not feasible at the MBA level when the students have no idea about the cultural orientations of people they may have to interact with in future. The additional problem these graduates will face is that a significant part of their communication with foreigners will be virtual with no face-to-face meetings. That means they will be denied information about most factors that constitute the cultural identity of the foreigners they will have to interact with. Jameson (2007) identifies six such factors: vocation (profession, level of employment), class (economic, social), geography (nationality, region), philosophy (outlook on life, including religious beliefs), language (monolingual, bilingual, multilingual), and biology (race, ethnicity, gender, age). A young manager who is armed with nothing more than the names and e-mail addresses of foreigners may not be able to figure out anything about their cultural identity, not even their gender. Yet, she has to communicate in a way that does not antagonize them.

What curricular interventions can we make to prepare the MBAs for their multinational, multicultural conversations? It is obvious that for such a complex and amorphous problem there are no simple or ready-made solutions. We have to look for creative solutions and be willing to take risks. We also need to try out various curricular possibilities for teaching culturally sensitive business communication even if there is a risk that we are not sure of the outcome.

One promising approach seems to be helping students develop their “cultural self-knowledge” and build cross-cultural awareness on it (Varner and Palmer, 2005). While Varner and Palmer’s four-stage proposal is targeted at multinational companies training their expatriate managers to communicate effectively with people from an already identified host culture, the principle it is built on appears to be very relevant to MBA students. Jameson (2007) enthusiastically endorses “understanding one’s own cultural identity” (p. 202) as the first step towards developing intercultural competence. After a detailed discussion of the components of cultural identity, she presents her pedagogical recommendations. She suggests that each individual (i) take a cultural snapshot of self (systematically, around the culture identity factors she has identified), (ii) reflect on it especially by recalling how it may have shaped the way he or she responded to any specific intercultural communication challenges faced, and (iii) figure out, by using cases or simulations, how he or she would respond to potential intercultural challenges. The idea behind both the proposals is that we should build on a thorough cultural self-knowledge or knowledge of the self that is created partly by the culture around one and partly by one’s own personality.

Building one’s approach to cross-cultural communication on thorough and systematic self-knowledge is a very sensible suggestion because when one contrasts one’s attitudes, beliefs, and values with those one’s culture is supposed to display, one will become wary of taking cultural stereotypes seriously. What should be cultivated in our students is not certainty but uncertainty about the values of the rest of the world. That will lead to greater tentativeness on the students’ part and save them from rash conclusions and unthinking judgments.

As MBA students are likely to be young with limited, if any, international experience, the gap has to be filled with the help of films, newspapers, books of fiction, and other media that capture intercultural experience. Again the democratization of technology comes to their rescue. They are now able to watch a large number of freely accessible YouTube videos, read online versions of newspapers from different parts of the world, visit chat rooms, and so on with the specific intention of getting a feel of how people in other parts of the world generally behave or respond to the same or similar events. By organizing group discussions and presentations on these experiences, teachers should be able to help the students relate themselves to these events through the prism of their own cultural identity.

No amount of exposure to the digital world can give students the real world experience they need. The reason is that the media of a country may not truly reflect a country’s culture. Do, for example, the popular Indian television serials reflect Indian life, culture, and values? Some aspects reflect the Indian cultural reality; some aspects do not. The soaps do what will help them capture the viewers’ eyeballs. So students have to be helped to separate the genuine from the put on, the general culture from subcultures, family or community values from individual opinions, and so forth.

To supplement their exposure to foreigners in the digital world, we should invite foreigners to our midst, to our classrooms. They should be encouraged to share their responses to our culture with students and faculty. This will facilitate and enhance the students’ discovery of their own culture and their own individual cultural identities within it. Instead of restricting such invitations to academics, as we normally do, we should consider any foreigners suitable. The chef in a local Chinese restaurant, for example. The spouse of an expat Korean manager. A French truck driver on a holiday. An American backpacker in search of nirvana. An Arab businessman who has had a course of ayurvedic massage in a vaidyashala. Any tourist, for that matter. And we find tourists of all colors and classes increasingly in our towns, even small ones. During 2007, for example, more than 5 million foreign tourists arrived in India; and the numbers have been going up by 12 to 15% every year (Press Information Bureau, 2008). Exposure to and interaction with a wide range of foreigners is important for saving ourselves from the clutches of stereotypes.

It is also important to look at the teacher’s role in promoting intercultural competence among the students. How will teachers prepare themselves to enlighten the students? They themselves should go through the process of developing cultural self-knowledge, reflecting on previous cross-cultural communication challenges, and taking a view on how they would now deal with similar challenges. It is not that these should be models for students. No model should be provided. Each student will have to develop his own or her own cultural intelligence.

It is possible for teachers of other subjects such as Organizational Behavior or Human Resources Management to help by introducing intercultural complications when they deal with topics such as

conflict resolution, negotiation, and persuasion. Similarly, teachers of communication themselves should be able to bring in the intercultural angle when they deal with standard topics in business communication such as oral presentations, telephoning and teleconferencing, report writing, and e-mail communication.

Conclusion

Here, then, are the five steps that I suggest teachers of business communication take in order to equip their MBA students to face the new globalized world confidently and do well there, exploiting the easy access that they have to the digital world.

1. Break free from cultural certainties built on stereotypes and enhance one's own cultural intelligence in preparation for helping students improve theirs.
2. Take the promotion of cultural intelligence among students as a priority objective. Seek the help of colleagues to introduce intercultural sensitivity in their part of the curriculum.
3. Help the students discover their individual and group cultural identities as a starting point for understanding other cultures without falling into the trap of

stereotypes.

4. Encourage students to explore other cultures as manifested in the free and easily accessible digital world. Help them interact with online communities with the specific aim of improving cultural sensitivity. Have them reflect on their impressions systematically through guided group discussions and presentations.
5. Arrange for formal interaction with tourists of both sexes from different strata of society coming from different parts of the world.

It is obvious that an instructional approach of this kind, which does not build on generalizations about other cultures but relies on an ad hoc mixture of exposure to, and guided reflection on, the real and the virtual worlds will lead to confusion among students. There will not be a clear and coherent picture of any culture emerging as students go through the programme. They will not be sure how they should proceed. That is precisely the reason why this approach should be tried out. This will help them develop a certain tentativeness in dealing with foreigners. When one notices that a real Pakistani or a real Italian talks and behaves differently from what stereotypes expect them to, one reaches a great high in cultural intelligence.

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