

A Door Opener: Teaching Cross Cultural Competence to Seafarers

C. Chirea-Ungureanu

Constanta Maritime University, Constanta, Romania

P.-E. Rosenhave

Vestfold University College, Tonsberg, Norway

ABSTRACT: The importance of developing cultural competence in maritime professionals is increasingly being recognized. Seafarers seek knowledge to help them cope with the growing diversity of their employers, leaders and colleagues. However, even though requirements designed to address cultural competence are incorporated into maritime school curricula, the institutional culture of maritime education systematically tends to foster static and essentialist conceptions of "culture" as applied to seafarers. Many questions emerge when we try to teach in a way that brings alive the humanity of mariners. These questions are waiting for their answers, so in our paper we shall try to find and explain some approaches and ways of teaching and research as the goal is to provide maritime professionals with practical wisdom in comprehending what is the seafarers' life on board ship.

1 CROSS CULTURAL COMMUNICATION IS A 21ST CENTURY SKILL

In the 21st Century, people need to have the ability to get along with other cultures, ethnic groups, and races at all levels of society. In a diverse society, there is a pressing need to communicate cross-culturally in and out of the classroom. As the planet ages and communities become more multilingual, classrooms reflect a global society where people must learn to interact and create harmony.

Teachers must be master communicators who can influence young minds in positive ways. Learning how to instruct students in the art of cross-cultural communication is a necessary goal of effective educators. More importantly, teachers must take the lead and develop strategies that assure their students will learn not only navigation and maritime technology, but also cross-cultural communication skills.

The difficulty is that no-one is "born great" at communicating with others, because:

- 1 Parents never taught their children about effective communication (probably because no one taught them.)
- 2 In school effective communication is not generally taught: children have to sit in their seats, be quiet, and raise their hands to speak and to recite facts upon demand.
- 3 In the workplace, there might be some mandatory training about effective communication, but it is known that information about "effective communication" in the workplace can be devastating to interactions.

When communication in the workplace is taught, it is usually explained from one of two perspectives:

- 1 To illustrate how to communicate to influence someone or
- 2 To illustrate how to communicate with people to be more efficient and get more work done.

Communicating with the intention to influence or communicating with the intention to be efficient or effective may lead to more sales and higher productivity in the workplace. But, when attempting to use either of those two strategies for onboard

communication, it becomes quickly apparent how easy it is to destroy it in almost no time at all.

Good communication isn't created by efficiency or influence. It is created by connection, interaction, balance and understanding.

Communicating one's ideas is the key to knowledge. As such, it is extremely important for educators to elicit academic performance from students that is based on communication skills.

There are three fundamental elements which embody the spirit of cross-cultural communication:

- Intercultural awareness
- Intercultural sensitivity
- Intercultural communication competence (Cole.C.W, Prichard B. &Trenkner P.2005).

2 BUILDING STUDENTS' AWARENESS AND SENSITIVITY IS FUNDAMENTAL

As a teacher, one must incorporate each element into lesson planning. For instance, through development of intercultural awareness, students learn to identify and accept cultural similarities and differences. Some methods of instruction that improve intercultural awareness are: reading assignments, and watching drama. In terms of intercultural sensitivity, students must learn to respect and tolerate cultural differences of their peers. Being able to walk in another person's shoes is an acquired ability that takes training and practice. Methods of instruction that enhance intercultural sensitivity are role-playing, group discussions, and paired exercises (Littrell et al.2005).

The importance of developing cultural competence in maritime professionals is increasingly being recognized. Seafarers seek knowledge to help them cope with the growing diversity of their employers, leaders and colleagues. However, even though requirements designed to address cultural competence are incorporated into maritime curricula, the institutional culture of maritime education systematically tends to foster static and essentialist conceptions of "culture" as applied to seafarers.

So what is the best way to give nautical students a more flexible and useful knowledge of culture to work effectively with multilingual crewmembers? In a short amount of time it may seem that the best method is to explain some basic cultural characteristics to look for and use in maritime encounters with multilingual seafarers. However, while helpful in providing some guidelines to work with, this approach stereotypes and objectifies seafarers by ignoring individual variation and the fluidity of cultural change. It creates resistance in students who feel they are not part of the discussion.

This method of teaching is distancing by its very nature, as it describes a constructed group rather than individual mariners, which is what we actually encounter in practice.

3 COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE IMPROVES STUDENTS' TOLERANCE LEVELS

Intercultural communication competence is the major goal of students who develop both intercultural awareness and sensitivity. Communication competence reflects having the ability to negotiate and interact well across cultures. Reading, writing, and speaking are methods of instruction that help to increase intercultural communication competence. By increasing the level of discourse in the classroom, a teacher can expect students to make cultural connections that may last forever.

It is an educator's responsibility to ensure that his or her classroom supports intercultural awareness, sensitivity and communication competence. Without an understanding of cultural diversity it is possible for teachers to neglect the different needs of every student. Developing curriculum that addresses cross-communication is one solution to this ever present problem. Intercultural Education aims to go beyond passive coexistence, to achieve a developing and sustainable way of living together in multilingual societies through the creation of *understanding* of, *respect* for and *dialogue* between the different cultural groups onboard ship.

Intercultural education onboard cannot be just a simple 'add on' to the regular nautical curriculum. It needs to concern the learning environment as a whole, as well as other dimensions of educational processes, such as academic life and decision making, teacher education and training, curricula, languages of instruction, teaching methods and student interactions, and learning materials (UNESCO 2003).

Many questions emerge when attempting to teach in a way that brings alive the humanity of mariners. How can students hold general knowledge without it overwhelming their perceptions? How can they remain open to learning from mariners who went before them onboard ship? How can they maintain awareness that any mariner is like all other humans in some ways, like some other humans in certain ways, and also has a particular life story?

One approach is to use narrative, by emphasizing how telling, receiving, and creating stories are integral features of maritime practice, teaching, and research. The goal is to provide maritime professionals with practical wisdom in compre-

hending what is the seafarers' life on board ship. Narrative humanises by putting the mariner first and the cultural group second. A narrative approach helps students make connections, see similarities as well as differences, and deal with complexity rather than reduce to simplicity.

Asking people to deal with complexity, when they want simplicity is a struggle. It challenges nautical students to deal with vulnerability when they seek certainty and humility when they seek competence. Our experience shows that many students are up to the challenge and that what we discuss through narrative may actually prove to be more useful and more immediately practical in terms of everyday maritime experience than a detailed list of general cultural characteristics.

In cross-cultural training and living within a multilingual environment, the goal of the seafarer is to learn about himself and others. Just as the desire to learn another language arises from the desire to communicate with local people and understand the new world, the seafarer also will want to learn the silent language of cultures—his own and his host onboard environment. In trying to appreciate the differences between his own culture and that on board ship, the seafarer may feel that he is supposed to like and accept all these differences. Cultural sensitivity, however, means knowing about and respecting the norms of the onboard culture, not necessarily liking them. The seafarer may, in fact, be frustrated or even offended by certain acts. In some cases, increased understanding will lead to greater respect, tolerance, and acceptance; in others, it just leads to enhanced awareness. The goal in cross-cultural training is to increase understanding, to equip the seafarer with a powerful set of skills, a framework to make sense of whatever he does and experiences as a seafarer so that he will be able to interact successfully with the multilingual environment. Whilst often understanding much of what has been happening, many actions, attitudes, values—entire ways of thinking and behaving—may on occasion surprise, puzzle, or even shock the seafarer. On the other hand, the latter may also be unaware of what he has in common with other multilingual crewmembers. People in any culture, for example, need to find an acceptable way to express anger, cope with sadness, manage conflict, show respect, demonstrate love, or deal with sexuality. When examining the differences between two cultures, one often looks at different ways of answering the same questions. If the similarities are not clear, it is because the ways of acting or thinking differently are what produced the most challenge and tension. What people have in *common* often goes unnoticed, but it is one of the important parts of life onboard ship.

Keep in mind, too, that culture is just one of numerous influences on behaviour. People can differ from each other in many other aspects as well. Could the miscommunication or misunderstanding between two seafarers of different nationalities actually be the result of a difference in job position, personality, age, generation, or gender, and not a cultural difference? In trying to understand the role culture plays in behaviour, it should be noted that personal differences often play as great or even a greater role.

It is important to understand that what people do and say in a particular culture, whether it is yours own or that of a host onboard environment, are not arbitrary and spontaneous, but are consistent with what people in that culture value and believe in. By knowing people's values and beliefs, it is possible to anticipate and predict their behaviour. Once a seafarer is no longer caught off guard by the actions of host onboard crew members and once he does not simply react to these, the seafarer is well on his way to successful cultural adjustment. Moreover, once the seafarer comes to accept that people behave the way they do for a reason, whatever he may think of that reason, he can go beyond simply reacting to that behaviour and figure out how to work with it. Knowing where host onboard behaviour is coming from doesn't mean that the seafarer has to like or accept it, but it should mean that he is no longer surprised by it—and that is a considerable step toward successful interaction.

Designing the right lesson plans is not enough. Teachers must use the plans consistently and make sure that students understand learner objectives. Doing this they will ensure that students are focused on academic success, as they gradually develop the capacity to tolerate others' differences.

The intercultural competence is required not only in interactions between people and groups, but in ethnic and international relations, where different cultures may interfere. That is why the education aims gradually to build the needed intercultural skills, aiming to train for objectivity in dealing with other cultures and their representatives.

The general model of curriculum design involves the following steps, performed in the following order:

- 1 *What shall I do?* This step implies the targets formula (Establishing of the general aim of educational program based on the beneficiary's needs)
- 2 *What shall I use?* This step implies the providing resources (Appropriate core objectives) and restriction analysis (time, learning abilities etc.)
- 3 *How shall I do it?* This step implies the working strategy (Appropriate learning tasks and situations consistent with the objectives)

4 *How shall I know that I have done the right thing?* This step implies the development of assessment tools.

In their review of the cross-cultural training literature, Littrell *et al* (2006) have identified six approaches to the delivery of intercultural training programs:

Attribution Training – The aim of attribution training is for the trainee to interpret behaviour from the viewpoint of the host culture nationals.

Culture Awareness Training – This approach uses T-groups (cultural sensitivity training groups) to guide the exploration of the trainee's culture of origin. This entails delving into cultural biases and values, based on the premise that a deep awareness of the trainee's own culture will lead to a better understanding of the dynamics of intercultural communication.

Interaction Training – The trainee employee benefits from on-the-job training, learning the ropes from a former trainee who is already performing the job function.

Language Training – Language acquisition is an important element of adjustment to a new cultural environment. While fluency is always the goal of a language training program, making the effort to speak even simple phrases in the local language generates enormous goodwill among host nationals.

Didactic Training – The goal of this fact-based training is to supply practical information to the trainee regarding living conditions, cultural differences, job details, and other requirements for establishing a lifestyle in the new locale. "In addition," write Littrell *et al*, it provides "a framework for evaluating new situations that will be encountered [and]... enhances the cognitive skills that enable the trainee to understand the host culture."

Didactic training is delivered via any combination of informal briefings, written materials, lectures, and cultural assimilators. The latter is a training tool that allows the trainee to consider how best to respond to various authentic cross-cultural situations through the use of critical incidents. According to the authors, it has been established that the cultural assimilator lessens the incidence of adjustment problems.

Experiential training – This approach develops intercultural communication skills through techniques such as simulations, and role-plays. As its name implies, it involves learning by doing. The most effective training approaches are those that incorporate experiential learning techniques.

The training approach had several advantages:

- It moved the focus from the trainer to the trainee.

- It compelled trainees to take responsibility for their own learning.
- It stressed problem-solving rather than memorization of facts.

It put the emphasis on learning how to learn.

This idea of learning how to learn is still an important theme, as cross cultural training cannot prepare seafarers for every possible situation likely to be encountered in the host onboard environment. Essentially, the seafarer is taught how to learn and acquire information about another culture.

The majority of multinational shipping companies providing intercultural training to their employees do so through informal briefings. The field is still developing, however, and new advances are emerging that may someday change the face of cross-cultural training.

Cross-cultural training improves skills that lead to seafarer psychological comfort, including intercultural competence and effective interpersonal communication. It comprises three dimensions: work adjustment, interaction adjustment with host onboard environment, and general adjustment to the foreign culture. Although many factors affect overall seafarer adjustment in a new onboard environment, numerous studies have suggested that cross-cultural training can contribute significantly to adjustment in each of these dimensions. While cross cultural training alone cannot guarantee successful adjustment to a novel culture, the studies suggest that relevant, honest, and current training content generates more realistic expectations about life in the new onboard environment. They found that cross-cultural training was positively related to:

- self-development and self-confidence;
- the establishment of personal relationship with host onboard environment;
- overall feelings of well-being and satisfaction; and
- cognitive skills development with regard to perceptions of host onboard environment.

It is the absence of this connection between the self and the new cultural onboard environment that leads to what Kim in her book *Becoming Intercultural: An Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation*, calls "a serious disequilibrium within the stranger's psyche." It can manifest itself in the following symptoms:

- Sadness
- Loneliness
- Homesickness
- Idealizing the home culture
- Stereotyping host culture nationals
- Dissatisfaction with life in general
- Loss of sense of humour
- Sense of isolation, withdrawal from society

- Overwhelming and irrational fears related to the host country
- Irritability, resentment
- Family conflict
- Loss of identity
- Feelings of inadequacy or insecurity
- Negative self-image
- Developing obsessions (health, cleanliness)
- Cognitive foginess, lack of concentration
- Depression

People interact! Therefore the mere existence of some kind of cross-cultural training is not sufficient. It is recommended that the training be individually designed to accommodate the particular situation as outlined above. Cultural distance – the extent to which two cultures are similar or different – should also be taken into account. The greater the cultural distance between the home and host onboard cultures, the more necessary cross-cultural training is.

It is clear that cross-cultural training creates favourable conditions for cross-cultural learning to occur. When it's relevant to the seafarer's situation, it makes possible the development of realistic expectations about life in the host onboard environment, and increases skills that lead to overall seafarer adjustment. Cross-cultural training provides realistic expectations, and insight into managing cultural differences.

The cultural composition of societies is today growing even more complex through increasing migratory movements from one country to another and from rural to urban regions. Whereas indigenous peoples and other minority groups can look back on a long historical tradition in a given region, today's migratory movements tend to produce culturally fragmented, usually urban or semi-urban societies, which present specific challenges for educational policies (UNESCO 2001).

The distinct aims of Intercultural Education can be summarized under the headings of 'the four pillars of education' as identified by the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century (Delors, 1996). According to the conclusions of the Commission, education should be broadly based on the pillars of:

1. Learning to know, by *“combining sufficiently broad general knowledge with the opportunity to work in-depth on a small number of projects”* (Delors, 1996). The Commission states further, *“a general education brings a person into contact with other languages and areas of knowledge, and... makes communication possible”* (Delors, 1996). These results of a general education represent some of the fundamental skills to be transmitted through intercultural education.

2. Learning to do, in order to *“acquire not only an occupational skill but also, more broadly, the competence to deal with many situations and to work in teams”* (Delors, 1996). In the national and international context, learning to do also includes the acquisition of necessary competencies that enable the individual to find a place in society.

3. Learning to live together, by *“developing an understanding of other people and an appreciation of interdependence – carrying out joint projects and learning to manage conflicts – in a spirit of respect for the values of pluralism, mutual understanding... peace”* (Delors, 1996) and cultural diversity. In short, the learner needs to acquire knowledge, skills and values that contribute to a spirit of solidarity and co-operation among diverse individuals and groups in society.

4. Learning to be, *“so as to better develop one's personality and be able to act with ever greater autonomy, judgment and personal responsibility. In that respect, education must not disregard any aspect of a person's potential...”* (Delors, 1996) such as his or her cultural potential, and it must be based on the right to difference. These values strengthen a sense of identity and personal meaning for the learner, as well as benefiting of their cognitive capacity.

Several studies have examined the problems and potential solutions when facing an intercultural environment at work, but on a ship an additional dimension is added. Not only do the seafarers have to ensure good communication during working hours. The ship is also a learning environment and a social environment, where people eat and live together, often for long periods on end. For this reason Intercultural communication is what makes the teamwork function on a ship. It gives you a positive social environment, fewer problems and most certainly fewer accidents.

An extreme example: the bulk carrier Bright Field, which ran into a shopping complex in New Orleans in 1996, leaving 66 people injured, illustrates an extreme situation with a crew and a pilot from different cultures: American and Chinese. The word “no” is a very impolite word to the Chinese especially to an authority such as a pilot. Since the pilot was not able to understand the communication in Chinese between the engine room and the bridge, he was left unaware of the engine problems and could take no preventive action to mitigate the accident.

It is no doubt difficult for seafarers that communicate in their native languages and perhaps simplified English in their day-to-day communication to suddenly muster a good command of a standard marine vocabulary according to the STCW convention, when an emergency situation occurs.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Providing realistic expectations of life in the new locale, and the skills to deal with intercultural interactions, should therefore reduce the stress and ambiguity seafarers experience when dealing with the unknown onboard culture, thus improving adjustment. However, studies on the effectiveness of cross-cultural training have produced mixed results, perhaps because there is no consensus on what, exactly, it entails.

Education systems need to be responsive to the specific educational needs of all minorities, including migrants and indigenous peoples. Among the issues to be considered is how to foster the cultural, social and economic vitality of such communities through effective and adequate educational programmes that are based on the cultural perspectives and orientations of the learners, while at the same time providing for the acquisition of knowledge and skills that enable them to participate fully in the larger society.

Improved crew communication through training and education can reduce the risk of accidents as long as it is based on fundamental knowledge of the dynamics of crew interaction and communication. Leadership onboard necessitates cross-cultural competency to revoke cultural differences in order to get the best out of a multicultural team. What you can do is decide, if you want to be limiting or non-limiting in your communication, listening or non-listening. You have the choice to open up professional communication.

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