Cross-Cultural Paper and Presentation

**Introduction and Rationale**

It is increasingly common to have intercultural encounters in our everyday lives, and we are unable to anticipate and prepare for many of these situations in advance. However, a planned sojourn to another culture provides students of intercultural communication an opportunity to think ahead and prepare themselves mentally and physically to become “foreigners.” Using principles of active learning, this exercise engages students in learning course material for the applied purpose of constructing a detailed travel plan to an unfamiliar country or culture.

This semester-long assignment enables students to think critically about intercultural communication competence by applying theories and concepts commonly discussed in intercultural or intergroup communication-related courses to the concrete task of constructing a cross-cultural analysis.

**Objectives**

* Using all available resources in and outside of class, students will research and create an individual semester-long Cross-Cultural project on a culture of their choosing.
* Through completion of their C-C Project, students will demonstrate understanding of theoretical concepts central to the study of cross-cultural variation and will apply these concepts in analyzing the cultural communication norms of their chosen culture.
* Students will professionally present their cross-cultural analyses to the class in conference-style panel presentations, comparing and contrasting their findings with those of their peers.

**Course Objectives Associated with Assignment:**

 1. Understand principles and behaviors that contribute to effective interpersonal communication in various world contexts.  
3. Describe the impact of diverse beliefs, attitudes, and values on perceptions.  
6. Comprehend the complexities and subtleties of both verbal and nonverbal messages.  
10. Identify causes of and strategies to manage interpersonal conflict.  
11. Increase understanding of how technology and media affects interpersonal communication.  
12. Apply principles of composition, such as research and documentation, to the theory and practice of interpersonal communication.

**Description of the Activity**

At the beginning of the semester, students choose an unfamiliar country or culture they would be interested in visiting or learning about in depth. Students construct a detailed project of culture-specific content over the course of the semester containing information and analysis that a traveler to the focal culture should know to facilitate their visit. The analysis consists of several individual components that students draft, revisit, and revise progressively throughout the semester.

**Overview of the project from Beginning to End**

Within the first week of the semester, students submit a list of at least five countries or cultures they are interested in doing their project on, in order of preference, along with a short justification for each of their choices. Broadly define “culture” to include any recognized group of individuals who share a way of life, customs, values, and/or traditions. For example, in addition to being able to choose the entire country of Spain, students may choose a more specific region and co-culture in Spain like the Basque region. All culture-level analyses require some degree of generalization: country-level analyses will focus on the “mainstream” cultural characteristics of the country, whereas regional or co-cultural-level analyses will focus on generalizable characteristics of these more specific areas or groups. The instructor should make every effort to assign students one of their top choices; however, students’ preferences are best balanced with having class-wide representation of as many different cultures as possible. No two students should be assigned the same culture.

Once students receive their culture assignments in week two, they can begin researching and completing components of the project in coordination with the course schedule of weekly readings and topics discussed in class. Students complete and submit short journal assignments every few weeks to enable the instructor to track their progress and provide feedback on their projects to date (see schedule for dates and prompts). Students complete their projects individually, although classmates are encouraged to share resources and ideas (e.g., useful source materials, organizational strategies, and aesthetic qualities). All components of the final project are combined and organized into a single project turned in at the conclusion of the semester. Students are encouraged to incorporate elements of creative design in producing their final project portfolios, utilizing section dividers, professional-looking layouts and font style choices, color photographs, etc. Students present their completed portfolios in class as travel panelists on conference-style panels constructed in advance by the instructor based on topical groupings (e.g, continents or regions of the world).

**Components of the Project:**

***Journal Entries - 4 entries worth 20 points each***

The journal entries are the primary means by which the instructor is able to ensure students are working on their project over the course of the semester and provide them with progressive feedback. Travel journal prompts should solicit from students a combination of factual knowledge, application of this knowledge to their specific contexts, and an element of subjective reflection in their responses. In short, the first prompt asks students to explain their interest in the chosen culture, describe what they may already know, or think they know, about the culture, and predict what difficulties they may encounter adjusting to the new culture. The second prompt requires students to demonstrate they are actively researching their culture and applying the cultural value dimensions. Prompt three corresponds with course readings and discussion about verbal and nonverbal communication expectations across cultures and tasks students with explaining their culture-specific preliminary findings on communication expectations. The final prompt asks students to reflect on the extent to which they perceive the project helped them achieve course-specific learning objectives. It also provides them an opportunity to share advice they would give to future students beginning this project, which is valuable feedback for the instructor to share with future classes. Due dates for each prompt are on the schedule.

***Project - 100 points***

Students will use the information found during the writing of their journals as well as additional research needed in order to build their final cross-cultural project.  The project will include several sections and may be presented to the instructor as a paper, website, or other visual means of delivery such as PowerPoint or a slide deck in Google.  Please discuss plans for the final project with your instructor if you have questions about the suitability of your project to the assignment.  Students should be creative in their approach but do need to be sure to include adequate information for each section of the project regardless of modality they use to present the project.

***The project should include the following sections:***

**1. Cultural Facts**

Cultural facts include information like the following, although instructors may adapt their requirements as needed: languages spoken in the culture; dominant (and other key) religions practiced; significant historical events; governmental structure; economic base and industry; major exports/imports; climate and its impact on people’s daily lives (e.g., natural resources, energy use for heating/cooling, common foods/diets); and demographic characteristics of the population (e.g., ethnicity, socioeconomic stratification, age distribution). There are several governmental and nongovernmental resources available online that provide information on cultural facts that students can easily access for their projects. In cases where little or no culture-specific information is available—for a small region or group, for example—students can be encouraged to contextualize information that is available about their chosen culture within cultural facts pertaining to a larger culture or nation-state in which their co-culture exists. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) World Factbook is one example of a highly accessible and credible source of information for over 260 countries and other world entities: https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/

***2.* Cultural Analysis**

In the cultural analysis portion of the project, students are tasked with describing and applying the major dimensions of cultural variation identified by comparative intercultural researchers such as Geert Hofstede, Harry Triandis, Florence Kluckhohn, Fred Strodtbeck, and Edward T. Hall. One such framework by Hofstede consists of six dimensions on which cultures vary: individualism-collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, masculinity-femininity, long-term orientation versus short-term orientation, and indulgence-restraint. In addition to being one of the most extensively researched frameworks for understanding cross-cultural variation in cultural values, much of this research has been compiled on a website students will find particularly helpful for the project. The Hofstede Insights website (https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/) allows visitors to view a country’s scores (or two or more countries simultaneously) on each of the six value dimensions, along with analysis of the scores’ meaning when compared to global averages.

**3. Verbal and Nonverbal Communication Expectations**

As a project specifically designed for use in intercultural communication-related courses, a key component of the project is an analysis of the ways in which culture shapes our communication norms. Concepts such as high- and low-context communication (see McKay-Semmler, 2017), personal space (proxemics), gestures, and eye contact (see Van de Vijver, 2017), as well as monochronic and polychronic uses of time (see Kaufman-Scarborough, 2017), are rich areas of theory and research for students to apply in better understanding communication norms in their project cultures. The encyclopedia articles cited above supply helpful references and further readings lists in addition to providing summaries of these concepts supported by available research findings. More research on communication norms exists for some countries/cultures than others; however, based on a solid understanding of the concepts and similar cultures, students can make informed inferences about many of the verbal and nonverbal communication expectations in their chosen cultures.

**4. Relevant Current News Events**

An important part of traveling wisely is knowledge of the goings on in a particular region or country. Not only does this prepare an individual to handle potential dangers or inconveniences (major or minor), knowledge of locally impactful current events makes a person a better, and more mindful, conversationalist when interacting with cultural members. News about workers striking, natural disasters, a slow or booming economy, new political leadership, or even a local YouTube star can be practically, as well as psychologically, valuable information to the extent that it helps reduce our intercultural communication uncertainty.

In this section of the project, students provide a list of 7-10 news articles (English translations when necessary) that report on current events directly affecting their chosen culture. In addition to providing the APA 6th edition source citation of the news article (or the citation and url link to a video news story), students compose a short annotation of the news story describing the news event and how it may affect their travel plans or interactions with locals.

**5. Annotated Bibliography**

Students’ final projects should also include an annotated bibliography of 10-15 credible and highly useful resources for information on their specific chosen culture (e.g., books, films, websites). All sources of information used in the construction of the project, including course readings, should be cited in-text throughout the project and included in a separate reference list; while the reference list should be distinct from the annotated bibliography, sources may be duplicated across these lists.