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## DISCOURSE AND DIALOGUE IN A CULTURALLY DIVERSE ACADEMIC CLASSROOM

Globalization of the world economies requires the increased interaction between students from various cultures. This complex socio-cultural phenomenon challenges contemporary educators with seeking the answers to the following questions: How should the modern university education in an era of globalization, the internet, ethnic politics, and a TV remote that offers hundreds of different channels look like? How to integrate and encourage culturally diverse students to demonstrate loyalty to the ideals, habits and values that hold academic world together? What kind of assimilation can take place today? What is possible? What is desirable?

This paper sets out to investigate the discrepancies between cultures interweaving in the 21<sup>st</sup> century European academic classroom on three basic levels: time structure, conceptions of self and identity, and communication styles (including academic discourse) and prove that, in contrast with both the dominant paradigm of assimilation and the view that our worlds are too isolated to understand each other, cross-cultural communication in an academic classroom is possible. The purpose of this article is also to demonstrate that competence in intercultural dialogue gives us the opportunity to learn other socio-cultural systems, achieve awareness of the structure of our own system, and improve conditions for intellectual inquiry.

The deepening ethnic and culturally diverse texture of a European academic classroom makes multicultural education imperative as the twenty first century begins. Working with students of different cultural backgrounds, languages and experiences is a multidimensional endeavor. Success includes not only linguistic competence but cultural knowledge as well. Students are required to learn linguistic skills and just as importantly they must acquire the standards of European American socio-cultural norms for effective communication.

I have traveled widely, lived in different countries and states, and worked with people of practically every race, ethnicity, nationality, and religion. Therefore, I am able to relate to the difficulties my students encounter when navigating new linguistic and cultural territory. Just as it is not a measure of a student's intelligence that they are not native speakers of English, similarly it is not a measure of a student's intelligence if they are not acquainted with European American cultural norms. It is the role of the lecturer to make those cultural standards explicit and to help students navigate the cultural divide. Therefore, the United States which have the longest tradition of integrating people from

various cultural backgrounds, encourage culturally responsive teaching to achieve meaningful educational outcomes. The culturally responsive classroom, also referred to as an inclusive classroom, is a space where all the voices are sought out and welcomed, participants feel free to challenge or support other people's perspectives on course topics, and it is safe for participants to feel uncomfortable and take necessary risks for real dialogue to occur. The lecturer must have a broader cultural understanding in order to teach students a different cultural perspective.

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Miscommunication usually occurs when a speaker relies on language, values, and expectations common to his/her cultural background to get a message across. An instructor must acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to communicate with students whose cultural heritage (traditions, religion, language, thinking patterns, and social structures of a culture) is very different. A full understanding of the nature of cultural identity and its influence on interpersonal relationships will eliminate potential miscommunication and conflicts.

Edward T. Hall coined four terms referring to four fundamental dimensions of culture: monochronic versus polychronic, and high-context versus low-context. From my classroom observations it can be concluded that the qualities of being polychronic and high-context apply to the majority of the inhabitants of the Middle East, Asia and Africa, whereas North European and North American societies rely on monochronic and low-context communication. Central and Eastern European societies hold beliefs and exhibit behaviors which have their roots in both monochronic and polychronic world perspectives.

There are vast discrepancies in the way monochronic and polychronic cultures view and manage time. Hahn presents sequential implications about time in a monochronic culture.

Monochrons relate to time differently: to them, time is discrete, not continuous. Monochrons see time as being divided into fixed elements — seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, and so on — temporal blocks that can be organized, quantified and scheduled. Monochrons love to plan in detail, making lists, keeping track of their activities, and organizing their time into a daily routine.

Monochrons prefer to do one thing at a time, working on a task until it is finished, then, and only then, moving on to the next task. To a monochron, switching back and forth from one activity to another is not only wasteful and distracting, it is uncomfortable.

(Hahn, <http://www.harley.com/writing/time-sense.html>)

Americans tend to have a very monochronic view of time. Time is fast, present and short-term future oriented, and also valuable. It is a point on a timeline which is tangible and can be saved, spent, wasted, or gained. Expressions such as “Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today”, “Seize the moment” (*carpe diem*) or “Don’t waste time” emphasize the fact that if time is lost, it cannot be recovered. Therefore, monochronic societies organize their lifestyles around the clock and favor youth, energy and vitality. All the tasks, activities are carefully planned and scheduled, and defined within specified boundaries. When I taught literature courses in the English Departments (both at the University of Southern Maine and at the University of North Texas), the American students were hardly ever late for class and never questioned the consequences of being tardy which were precisely described in the syllabus. In contrast, when I worked in the Intensive English Language Institute at the University of North Texas, the Middle Eastern students struggled to understand that time is not flexible. The attendance policy (coming to class on time in particular) was difficult to obey. When a student was tardy, I used to point at the clock to make him/her realize that the attendance rule had been broken and after the class referred him to the syllabus to read the attendance policy. However, the requirement of being on time did not make much sense to them until the end of the semester, when they saw how strongly tardiness affected their final grades. They were usually confused and felt a deep sense of injustice.

Middle Eastern cultures that put more emphasis on human relationships than speed have a polychronic view of time. They perceive and manage time differently. Time is synchronous and parallel. It is a point, but not on a timeline. Eastern time orientation relies on the concept of time as a cycle; things happen in cycles such as the cycle of the seasons or rebirth through reincarnation. Time reaches the areas beyond the lifetime and human comprehension. For people operating from the synchronic time perspective, time can never be lost because life events are cyclical, integrated within past, present and future. Pillay observes:

In such societies there is an invisible thread that joins the present to the past while at the same time marking the way into the future. The past, present, and future are therefore connected and intertwined and African cultural perspectives, fate, destiny and Spirit live in these intertwined spaces. From many Eastern and African cultural perspectives, fate, destiny and spirit live in these intertwined spaces and the unfolding of stories already written, waiting to be told or retold. Ancestors who have died are present at any given moment and are to be honored through rituals and invocations (Pillay 2006:43, 44)

Time is a flexible dimension which involves simultaneous occurrences of many things, the involvement of many people and continues into infinity. Polychrons tend to do many things at once, are highly distractible and subject to interruptions. They stop doing a task or participating in a meeting to attend another task or relationship simultaneously. In Arab cultures one seller at the market is approached by many customers and he is trying to assist everyone at the

same time. My Turkish students often ask me for permission to answer their cell phones during a class period. It is a matter of courtesy for them to be always available to people who want to talk with them. I must admit my initial surprise when my meeting with a Turkish professor was interrupted several times by him answering his mobile phone. But then I appreciated being always able to reach him, which meant that he was probably interrupting other meetings to talk to me. Philippe Rosinski observes that: "From a monochronic perspective, being professional or polite typically means devoting your full attention to one person or group at a time. From a polychronic perspective, being professional or polite means juggling different projects and people at the same time" (Rosinski 2010: 96)

Since Middle Eastern students tend to be easily distracted, it is a huge challenge for an instructor to keep them concentrated on one task. To make sure they stay focused, I have always used a variety of individual, pair and group activities within a class period. Middle Eastern students are usually very friendly, outgoing and willing to take risks in speaking/listening activities. If the lecturer can channel their energy in the right direction, he or she can have a dynamic student-oriented environment. These students enjoy working in multi-lingual groups engaging others because relationships are important. However, sometimes they have problems recognizing the limits of how long it is acceptable to joke in class. It may be hard to get them back on task, even after a small digression. Their difficulties with concentration on one activity at a time may also result from the intense desire to communicate verbally. I experience many humorous situations in my struggle to limit their urge to talk. One of my Turkish students, when asked why he was late to class, provided me with the following response, "My professor, I can't talk enough in class, so I was in a hall talking to a coffee machine". Another situation which illustrates that western standards of the etiquette of verbal communication are humorous to polychrons also happened with my Turkish students. Two elementary level students were explaining to me the circumstances in which one of them lost his school bag. They took time trying to find the right words to convey their message. Having realized that we had very little time left before the end of the break, I interrupted them and suggested possible answers. Then, one of them stopped me and directly quoted the words I frequently used in a class "Professor, when somebody is talking, you have to wait". This example illustrates that, on an intellectual level, polychronic people are capable of recognizing western rules operating on the concept of one point concentration (one person, one task at a time), but do these rules make much sense to them?

Hahn provides an accurate commentary on the polychronic perception of time:

To a polychron, time is continuous, with no particular structure. Polychrons see time as a never-ending river, flowing from the infinite past, through the present, into the infinite future. In

the workplace, polychrons prefer to keep their time unstructured, changing from one activity to another as the mood takes them. Although polychrons can meet deadlines, they need to do so in their own way. A polychron does not want detailed plans imposed upon him, nor does he want to make his own detailed plans. Polychrons prefer to work as they see fit without a strict schedule, following their internal mental processes from one minute to the next.

(Hahn, <http://www.harley.com/writing/time-sense.html>)

The second level of cross-cultural discrepancies is the way in which a conception of self and one's identity develops in different cultures. In each culture the nature of human identity can be investigated on three different levels: cultural (acquiring certain values, beliefs and norms shaped by traditions, cultural heritage, language, religion, and thinking patterns), social (the sense of belonging to a specific social group that a person identifies with because of similarities in age, gender, work, religion or ideology), and personal identity (possessing unique qualities that make a person different from other members of his/her group). However, I would like to note that although presented as separate categories, these three different elements of human identity demonstrate significant correlations. Thus, for example, a Middle Eastern girl's identity is shaped by the role and position of a woman in a Middle Eastern culture and is strictly connected with religious beliefs as well as her personality qualities.

The European American societies define themselves as being highly individualistic. An average American believes in the American myth that the United States is the land of unlimited opportunities where his/her potential can be fully developed. His/her identity is formed by the culture promoting achievement, growth and personal fulfillment. The Puritans and the Founding Fathers provided a solid basis for the creation of the culture encouraging hard work, commitment, and self-reliance. Although Americans exhibit a community spirit in terms of working together for the benefit of the community, the predominant, national qualities are individuality and independence.

Middle Eastern sense of identity and self-awareness are shaped by the interpersonal relations and feature communitarian cultural orientation. The strong sense of belonging to a community makes people feel responsible for their families and friends. The success of the group ensures the well-being of the individual, so that by considering the needs and feelings of others, one actually protects oneself. Communitarianism characterizes most African societies as well. Venashri Pillay discusses a Pan-African term *ubuntu* that means "humanness or personhood". The literal translation of this expression is, "A person being a person through other persons"(Pillay 2006: 37).

The discrepancy in individualistic and communitarian attitudes can be observed in a classroom when students from collectivistic countries do not attach the same importance to academic honesty and discipline like more individualistic American students. I have experienced a few conflicts with my non-American students who sometimes challenge the authority by breaking the policies related

to academic code of conduct and cheat on tests. They are willing to help each other regardless of the situation and circumstances. Being loyal to friends is paramount, even when it means the violation of university principles and putting their own academic career at risk. My Middle Eastern students also tend to see homework as optional, ask for special consideration to miss class, come late or turn in homework assignments late.

I have also observed other instances of their extreme loyalty and generosity in interpersonal relations. If there is a student in a class who falls behind and is unable to follow the lecture, he is immediately assisted by other classmates in clarifying the problem. Their sense of responsibility for the others, group harmony and cohesion can be depicted by a situation described to me by one of the ESL instructors in Warsaw. A Turkish student asked her to translate a phrase, "I'd like to withdraw all the money from my bank account" into Polish. When requested to elaborate on his plans, he explained that his friend needed money because of his problems with obtaining Polish visa and he wanted to assist him financially. He felt responsible for the well being of his friend and wanted to make sure he would be able to continue his pursuit of an academic career in Poland. Middle Eastern students also tend to lavish gifts on academic professors to demonstrate their appreciation for the educational efforts of the lecturers. However, it is not the only way these students communicate their gratitude and special rapport with professors. Since relationships in communitarian cultures are of vital importance, once a lecturer wins students' respect, they often approach him to chat and joke. One way to establish a good rapport with Middle Eastern students is to be prepared for some negotiations if possible. Some of the funniest times I experienced with my Arab students were bargaining about what to do for homework. At first I thought they were undermining my authority, but finally I realized that negotiation is a part of their culture and really a way to build a relationship between a student and a teacher. During both formal (classroom situations) and informal (casual conversations) encounters, Middle Eastern students are be very interactive and aural.

Communitarian cultures tend to adopt a high-power distance, according to Hofstede's division of cultural dimensions, which means that some people are considered superior to others because of their social status, gender, race, education, birth, personal achievements, family lineage, or other factors. These cultures rely on hierarchical civic structures where social status is ascribed instead of earned. Therefore, my Arab students believe that special treatment should be given to the individuals coming from socially privileged families. Individualistic cultures such as North American, however, claim to support equality and democracy, and adopt a low-power distance to their societal structures. Social position and authority is granted on the basis of personal achievements and accomplishments, at least in theory, not ascribed because of family connections.

Variations in academic communication patterns across cultures pertain to different intellectual style preferences and content organization. Before trying to

characterize any one intellectual style, the explanation of the term “intellectual style” is necessary for the full understanding of the phenomenon. In the process of launching an intellectual product we convert impressions, the way we view and perceive the world, into expressions, ways of turning thoughts into language. Because students bring very different backgrounds, knowledge, and learning styles to the classroom, the final intellectual product for the same assignment looks very different. When it comes to academic discourse, both in speaking and writing, students draw on various cross-linguistic and cross-cultural influences. The outcome of these influences manifests itself in all aspects of textual organization: focus and development, coherence and cohesion, sentence structure, and register.

Academic discourse, understood as an example of social interaction between speakers/writers and their audience, raises the question of how academic authors across cultures address the readers in order to create a particular image of themselves and to develop the communication according to the principles of the intellectual style they represent. Galtung (1985), distinguishes four intellectual styles which he labels as Saxon, Teutonic, Gallic and Nipponic. Although the core of his contrasts focuses predominantly on written rather than spoken discourse, his work is relevant to any work on discourse and cultural values. The Saxon style (also called linear) is said to characterize a low-context pattern of argumentation in English. Writers/speakers have a clear purpose and are very matter-of-fact, direct and positive in their formulas. Saxon intellectual approach features explicit, overt messages and relies on literal meanings of words. The dominant stereotype of a lecture in the Anglo-American classroom is in line with the general reader-friendliness of academic writing in this culture: the audience is addressed directly and there is a lot of pausing and joking to enhance presentation. I remember vividly my initial surprise by the way the Chair of the English Department of one of the universities in Texas addressed the faculty members saying, “The gay like me, who is standing in front of you, usually says: I have good news and bad news, but today I have only good news for you.” This contrasts with the paper-style speech that I was used to in my naive country, Poland, where rhetorical traditions were affected by German academic thought drawing on Teutonic style of argumentation. Both Teutonic and Gallic, characteristic of French, intellectual styles are weak on thesis and strong on theory formation and digressive argumentation strategies, with the Gallic one focusing on the elegance of expression. Oriental societies, on the other hand, which emphasize collective values and support features that foster social harmony, developed Nipponic argumentative style that is characterized by an affective interaction dominated by vague defensive formulas typical for high-context cultures.

Contemporary educators must demonstrate a readiness and openness to search for the ways of communication that will foster cross-cultural dialogue and harmony in a culturally diverse academic classroom. Lecturers should ponder

the following problems: What kind of assimilation can take place today? What is possible? What is desirable? How to integrate and encourage multicultural students to demonstrate loyalty to the ideals, habits and values that hold academic world together? Coming from multicultural backgrounds and having diverse conceptions of time, identity and methods of communication (including different traditions of the academic discourse), international students may not realize what the expected socio-cultural and intellectual norms in the Western world are. To reduce the confusion and complexity that cultural differences bring into the classroom, instructors should realize that monochronic and low-context perspective is not the only route to success, that making some room for polychronic and high-context orientation in the classroom may help to achieve meaningful educational purposes. For example, today the undisputed evidence of quality thinking is the Anglo-American academic discourse convention based on linear, coordinated and symmetrical principles for speaking and writing. Other cultural orientations demonstrating alternative standards for academic communication styles are disadvantaged. Since discrepancies in communication are vast across cultures, the process of negotiation of meaning and the adjustment to each other's styles are number one priority. Approximating the ideal of a successful cross-cultural communication in the world of academia may involve a fundamental shift in our views, norms and values, but will give us a profound opportunity to learn about our shared world, ourselves, and improve conditions for intellectual inquiry.

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