

Intercultural Training of International Teaching Assistants *

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Abstract

The variety of cultures represented by International Teaching Assistants (ITAs) demands a skillful accommodation of intercultural information to assist effective adaptation for the American classroom. This article proposes a distinctive profiling technique based on a model drawn from genetics. This approach will guide the consultant/trainer in the allocation of time and topics to accommodate the diversity of clients. The potential increase in effectiveness and efficiency render this approach distinctively superior to its generic-orientation alternative.

This article provided its authors with a unique opportunity to combine two of our strong interests. First, during 1986, we began work with a special committee at our former university to address the problems resulting from the use of international teaching assistants (ITAs), generally identified as graduate students for whom English is a second language and who were raised outside the United States of America. Based on this work, the committee designed a major six-day training program which the second

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author of this paper actively helped to initiate. Second, we are seriously concerned with the weak theoretical orientation of intercultural communication (Lakey, 1988). We firmly believe that more attention should be given to creative development of intercultural communication theory. The potential of a genetics model was encouraged by the Shavers' work (1992) and enhanced by a *New York Times* article which addressed contemporary musical compositions based on the DNA codes and other genetic phenomena (9/8/92). Accordingly, this paper will provide a genetics model to stimulate intercultural communication theory and training development. In turn, we hope the new model will confront the distinctive problems inherent to the use of international teaching assistants.

The ITA Problem

In recent years, most major research institutions in the USA have experienced an increase in the number of international teaching assistants (Woodcock, 1982; McMillen, 1986; Heller, 1986). Concomitant with this increase are difficulties in the American classroom, because ITAs are relatively unfamiliar with American culture and language. The increasing dependence on ITAs by major universities, especially in the sciences and mathematics, has led to an increased dissatisfaction among American undergraduates and their families. This situation is often referred to as the "foreign TA problem" (Mestenhauser et al. , 1980; Paige, 1983; Bailey, 1984; Ard & Swales, 1986). Part of the foreign TA problem is perceptual and not actual on the part of undergraduates, since the results of research suggest "that assumptions of widespread inadequacies in the language and teaching competencies of ITAs and dissatisfaction with preparation programs are unwarranted" (Chism, 1987, p. 249). Hardly anyone, however, questions the well-intended desire and need to increase the effectiveness of ITAs in the classroom.

Many universities provide orientation programs of varying types and duration to address the challenge of the teaching preparation for ITAs. Commitment to this special preparation demonstrates support for effective undergraduate instruction, as well as an awareness of the opportunity to increase the proficiencies of ITAs and undergraduates in intercultural communication. Universities with a significant portion of their undergraduate instruction performed by ITAs need to provide special training and evaluation for them to fulfill their obligation to the ITAs as well as to the students being taught by them. The authors have worked with a diversity

of these programs, ranging from a voluntary half-day orientation session to a compulsory six-day program. All of these efforts seem successful and receive impressive reinforcement by the participants, but this body of data is probably suspect when the participants are so appreciative for any help provided.

Despite the perceived success of past programs, concerns remain for enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of ITA training. These programs typically use a general orientation framework and concentrate on the areas of language, pedagogy, and cross-cultural awareness. Due to the constraints of time, resources, and so on, these orientations are designed to serve entire groups of ITAs, rather than to offer more culture-specific instruction; simply stated, they are overly general in nature. The implicit assumption is that all ITAs have the same needs that can be satisfied in a generic format. This type of preparation is certainly better than none and is considered to be helpful by participants and organizers. However, we must ultimately move beyond the general level of preparation and identify culturally-specific challenges faced by ITAs in the interaction with their students.

Based on their own and familiarity with the literature, LaLonde and Steward (1987) reported several findings that are contrary to their expectations. For example, their survey showed that 74% of the ITAs had visited the USA previously, either as tourists or as students. Furthermore, nearly 75% of all ITAs arrive in the USA more than one month before reporting to the university. Only 52% of ITAs attended university orientation programs for new, international students. The data suggest and some ITAs concur that certain aspects of the general orientation programs may be unnecessary for international students who have arrived early and been in the USA previously. Further, we have personally led widely divergent reactions by different cultural groups to the commonly used materials in the general orientation programs. In other words, a need exists for a training model that will identify specific needs of the individual and address them practically. This paper presents an effective model based upon some of the principles of genetics.

Toward a Genetics Model

The literature on intercultural communication often provides a simple illustration of the interaction of persons from different cultures leading to the creation of a "third culture," or a "negotiated social reality," that becomes the new milieu for their interaction. Consider Figure 1:

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Figure 1: Negotiation of "Third Culture"

As we examined this simple idea in various publications, we have been struck with the parallel with the reproductive process in the combination of sex cells from the parents. This process brings together a sampling of the genes and chromosomes of each parent to create a distinctive third organism. Pursuing this analogy prompts us to expand our simple illustration of intercultural communication into a model which captures the salient features in the social reality construction of the "third culture."

Before we attempt to fit the genetic phenomena into our intercultural milieu, we need to examine some basic genetic concepts, starting with the central word itself. "Genetics" has referred traditionally to the inheritance process of the organism, i. e., the transmission of characters from one generation to the next. More recently, the term has been expanded to include how an individual or trait is the result of interaction of genes (chromosomes) and the environment. Chromosomes are made of DNA, and they transmit the distinctive features of an organism to the next generation. They occur in pairs with each unit of a pair derived from one of the parents. The specific components of these chromosomes, patched together in a richly variable process, including environmental influences, create the genetic potential of a new organism. The word "chromosome" means colored bands which refer to the staining process identifying the distinctive genetic compositional bands of the chromosome. Each individual contains twenty-three pairs of chromosomes which constitute the human organism or the

human karyotype, the total complement of forty-six chromosomes for the human organism.

The complex process of reproduction entails the reduction of male and female chromosomes through cell division called "meiosis." By this remarkably efficient process, one member of each chromosome pair is distributed into the sperm or egg so that after fertilization, the number of chromosomes in the new individual is restored to forty-six. By knowing the distinctive features of the parents, i.e., the genetic makeup, one can predict the appearance of the new organism within reasonable limits. Although currently controversial among both geneticists and ethicists, the molecular manipulation of our DNA may ultimately lead to even more accurate predictions and control of aberrations and certain diseases.

The rich potential of genetics in our model for intercultural communication rests in the possibility of characterizing or profiling the distinctive features of each "parent" culture. Based on this potential, we might, in turn, predict the appearance and proportion of the third "culture" resulting from the parental mating, identify aberrations, and exert some control over the mutational (change) process. The applicability of this approach for intercultural relations is obviously constrained by our inability to identify and label the "chromosomal bands" with the precision of genetics, but we can capture several dimensions and project their prospective combinations.

Finally, chromosomes can be classified in part by the position of their centromeres which direct cell movement during cell division and by their size and bending pattern. If we can identify a small number of dominant cultural qualities which may govern the outcome of combinations (fertilizations), then we may have the essential tools for predicting the obstacles and appropriate solutions for intercultural effectiveness. Although we may lack genetic precision, we have a promising corrective feature: we can directly observe intuitive human adaptation and inductively organize the tactics used. Intercultural relations once set into various combinations can be recombined and in short evolutionary time and in the appropriate environment, we can learn to avoid undesirable combinatory patterns.

With profuse apologies to geneticists the world over, we have reduced the complex process of cell division in human reproduction to the following over-simplification. We represent each parent as having a two-part chromosomal composition from which one part meiotically combines with that of the other parent through fertilization to create the

unique offspring. The cells of the resulting zygote multiply by mitotic cell division representing growth of the new organism. Expressed another way, the chromosomes of each parent "culture" provide the genetic materials which combine with great variability to form the third culture from which the new and potentially improved representative(s) emerge.

To use this analogy requires one to treat the genetic stages metaphorically and perceive the new organisms as reborn improvements of their parents and as transformed in the context of culture C. It also requires one to think of culture in the biological sense of development in an artificial medium, as we traditionally think of it in intercultural relations. If we think of the meiotic process as the combining of the reduced number of chromosomes from each parent through several phases, we are further encouraged to view this as the opportunity to exercise control over the permutations through intervention of intercultural training (i.e., natural selection) and education to influence the specific genes involved and their combinatory patterning. To the serious geneticist, this leap moves into the social engineering of the pseudo-science eugenics. Because we are dealing with social-psychological, rather than bio-chemical, phenomena, we can deviate from our scientific model without the substantial compromise this leap presents for the geneticist.

As the resulting zygote in our model grows by cell division (mitosis), the process can be influenced by environmental manipulation (i.e., selection) as we once again use intercultural training and education to modify the compositional elements as they develop. Similar to the normal reproductive process where each organism may reflect the appearance of one parent more than the other (male versus female, for example), we also project the generation of organisms with characteristics more representative of one of the parents than the other. Theoretically, these prime specimens should be better adapted to the third culture (C) and become more interculturally sensitive. Figure 2 represents this analogy.

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Figure 2: "Genetic" Model

Intervention Strategies and Tactics

With this very general model in mind, let us consider its relationship to the ITA problem. The ultimate goal of intercultural communication is an important point of departure. As with human evolution, the goal is to produce more culturally sensitive individuals who can function more effectively in the essential intercultural relations of our modern world. This is tantamount to species adaptation! We are, therefore, trying to prepare ITAs and to some extent their students so that through more effective interactions they can become more culturally sensitive. The genetic model helps us chart the evolutionary process of birth and/or rebirth of the culturally sensitive person.

The line of thought generated by this model involves a few assumptions, some of which stretch our "genetic" roots: Each of us has the potential for cultural sensitivity, an interest in differences, even if only out of curiosity. So, the "genes" of potential cultural sensitivity are present. Thus, we need to think of the several phases of the meiotic process as steps in the intercultural communication training and education process whereby certain genes are favored. Hopefully, across "generations" of birth and rebirth, the results will generate a more culturally sensitive and better adapted world. One should note here that the ITA thus becomes a teacher of intercultural communication, as well as a teacher of their primary subject matter. Extending our analogy beyond the realities of genetics, as the third culture spawns new organisms, we can examine the aberrations and take corrective action during these mitotic processes. As we all know, intercultural communication education and training does not necessarily produce a promising third culture better adapted for cultural effectiveness. So, we may need an opportunity to monitor and check our products to insure that the new organisms will promote cultural sensitivity more effectively.

To bring this analogy even closer to the ITA problem, let us reexamine the genetic composition of representatives of cultures A and B (see Figure 2). The ITA representative of culture A consists of chromosomes from mother culture A, as well as some knowledge and expectations, correct or incorrect, about culture B. Obviously, features of culture A will dominate. The student representative of culture B consists of chromosomes from mother culture B as well as knowledge and expectations, correct or incorrect, about the ITAs' culture A. Based on these ingredients, what might we predict about the emergent culture C? Most likely, it will consist of a widely variable combination of A and B with a perplexing influence of mixed expectations based on the correct and incorrect information. If we are to exercise any control over the adaptation, then we must characterize each mother culture and address the expectations: What are salient features of cultures A and B? What are the potential expectations of the representatives for the other culture? What are the likely points of abrasion? Armed with this information we can plan our intervention tactics and strategies.

So far, we have treated this problem as though we are dealing with only two individual parents, when in fact we cannot enjoy such a tutorial luxury. We must instead plan to treat clusters of parents, the ITAs and students. Obviously, this multiplies our problems enormously. To simplify, we must devise a means of profiling these groups to permit special attention. Further, since our intervention strategies are primarily restricted

to the ITAs, we must help these potential parents primarily adjust to the other group of parents for successful interaction. In other words, can we prepare an ITA to make the primary adaptations necessary to deal with the variations within any group of students from another culture?

As we examine the defining characteristics of the chromosomes of the ITAs, we can ask what features might we cluster so that we can provide each similar group maximum preparation? Presume that on this chromosome are demographic and social-psychological variables, as well as expectations regarding the host culture. As in genetic research, we can stain and observe the distinctive features of each chromosome for comparison and contrast. We can tap into these concerns through short questionnaires in the early part of the general ITA orientation. We should be particularly concerned with "detrimental mutations." Among the demographic variables we want to know are where the students originated, their length of stay in the USA, their history of prior visits to the USA if any, and their language proficiency. Among the social-psychological variables, we would test for the presence, absence, or the degree of those qualities associated with acculturation potential such as those identified by Kim (1988): cultural similarity, physical salience, background prestige, openness, resilience, education, pre-entry training, prior sojourner experience, and transition circumstance.

This information would enable us to divide the ITA population into subgroups for special profiling interviews (like focus groups). We are aware of the common complaints concerning the language shortcomings and teaching weaknesses; however, are we certain we have arrived at the core of the problem? How have we arrived at our judgments regarding ITA needs? We are not arguing against the value of language training as a part of the ITA orientation, but such training and other general topic considerations have proven insufficient to prepare ITAs for many of the challenges in the classroom. Profiling interviews which tapped into their expectations about the host culture would be a giant step in the right direction.

The consulting interview model developed by the Shavers (1992) serves as the framework for intense profiling interviews. In this model, consultants use intense, open-ended, unbiased listening of the talk of the client. This initial conversation often contains keys to the "dilemmatic perspectives" of the clients and their assumptions about the perspectives of the other party. In the ITA situation, the two parties are ITAs and their students. The interactants' "dilemmatic perspectives" will have "sites of

conflict" that emerge in their talk. These "sites of conflict," the points where expectations and backgrounds clash, are analogous to the meiotic process presented in this paper or complex interactional "chromosomal bivalency" described by Shaver and Shaver (1992). Throughout these focused profiling interviews, consultants are looking for emerging topics, aka "sites of conflict," between the ITAs and their students.

Application of this model would be as follows: ITA training would now group similar ITAs based upon the questionnaire data and corresponding regions of cultural origin. Facilitators would engage these subgroups in profiling interviews with intense, open-ended interrogation which would tap into their expectations about the host culture. Ideally, experienced ITAs with similar backgrounds would participate in these activities. The groups would explore "sites of conflict" between the expectations of members of culture A and culture B. These sessions could also utilize simulations which open up problems which stem from divergent expectations. In fact, not all of the simulations would need to be intercultural, since social/classroom situations which are routine for the host students are often perplexing for the ITA who is a stranger in the host culture (Lakey & Hill, 1991); for an ITA to hear host students discuss an intracultural classroom situation could be very enlightening. Emerging issues or "sites of conflict" would be regarded as topics for special training.

Host students who have experienced ITAs in the classroom should also be interviewed regarding their past and present expectations and "sites of conflict." Emerging issues would be compared to those of the ITA subgroups and special training would be developed taking into account the "dilemmatic perspectives" of representatives of cultures A and B and their assumptions about the perspectives of each other. ITA training which developed from this profiling model should prove more effective and efficient because it would match the specific needs of the ITAs and host students in contrast to the general orientation model.

Training should include sessions for both ITAs alone and sessions composed of ITAs and host students. The program should be designed with simulation and interaction activities that feature points of conflict which emerged from the profiling sessions. L. Shaver (1992) suggests that the activities should be designed to be "(1) interactive, (2) experiential, (3) neutrally framed so as to be non-threatening, allowing for open interaction, (4) immediately available for post-activity processing, and (5) open-ended for flexibility" (p. 12). During the training process we also want to help the ITAs understand what we are doing so that they can do similar things

with their students. The ITAs can thus derive instructional information to be used in the process of accommodating the intercultural needs of the students.

Approximately four to six weeks into the semester, the ITA subgroups should be reconvened. The purpose of these additional sessions would be to refine the mitotic process actually taking place in the classroom (refer back to Figure 2). As described earlier, this is the opportunity to exercise guidance and control over the permutations in the process through specific intervention of intercultural training and education to influence the specific "genes" involved and their combinatorial patterning. Ideally, this profiling could be repeated several times throughout the school year. After the conclusion of the school year, these "experienced" ITAs should be able to help with the orientation and profiling of new ITAs.

Obviously, the proper allocation of time and topics must be flexible to reach the objective of optimal effectiveness and efficiency. The personnel for the program could be faculty from across the university since the ITA problem is a university-wide problem. These facilitators along with graduate students in such fields as intercultural communication could be trained to lead the profiling sessions. Host students could be recruited as volunteers interested in improving education at the university, or their participation could be part of internship programs required by various majors particularly from the social sciences. In fact, undergraduates are utilized on a volunteer basis in "talk-back" panels at the University of Washington's ITA Orientation (Sequeira & Darling, 1987). However the available talent is used, the results can be a steady accumulation of useful training aids and the generation of a helpful organizational climate.

Conclusion

This article presents an exciting challenge to its authors and readers. Can we use a genetic model to enhance the preparation of international teaching assistants? With a strong apology to geneticists, we abstracted the genetic process and tried to apply it. We believe the results are suggestive, if not provocative. By playing with the innumerable analogies involved, we found within our task a potential framework for presenting the business of intercultural communication training and education as a primary vehicle for the human evolution to a more culturally sensitive, interdependent world. In fact, intercultural interactions are analogous to the development of hybrid organisms which are comparatively more vigorous, are highly adaptable and may promise an even

stronger future. We encourage others to play with this model, as we collectively strive for a better conceptualization of intercultural communication, better ways to teach the subject, and better ways to solve specific intercultural problems such as that presented by our dependence on ITAs. The profiling reflected in the matching processes of chromosomes (DNA) certainly provides a productive visual image of an approach to the ITA problem.

One recurring theme of this article deserves final accentuation. The quantity of literature in intercultural communication is increasing as people from throughout the academic world are recognizing the importance of many related concerns. What we urge is closer examination of how that popularity is distracting us from our primary focus on intercultural communication per se. We need to clarify our focus and try to move well beyond the simplistic model of creating a third culture into the many questions about how that occurs, in what ways, and with what implications. The genetic model helps us focus on just what is that third culture, how it developed, and how it influences subsequent development of the contributing interactants? These are powerful concerns that can serve to redirect our attention to intercultural communication and its relevance in solving many of our current culturally-based problems.

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