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Travel Analysis Portfolio: Applying Theories of Cross-Cultural Communication to the Task of Personal Travel Planning

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Abstract

Intercultural encounters are increasingly common occurrences in our professional and personal lives, thus an awareness and working knowledge of cultural differences is important to competent communication. In this semester-long activity, students learn and apply theories and concepts about cross-cultural variation to an in-depth case analysis of a specific culture of their choosing. Individual components of the assignment progressively parallel course content, providing students multiple opportunities to actively apply their growing knowledge base to a specific cultural context. This lesson plan provides instructors with an overview of the semester-long activity from beginning to end, sample project components, reference information for up-to-date research summaries of various dimensions of cultural variation, and suggested debriefing activities.

Courses

Intercultural Communication; Intergroup Communication; Business Communication; Study Abroad Preparation

Objectives

- Using all available resources in and outside of class, students will research and create an individual semester-long Travel Analysis Portfolio (TAP) project on a culture of their choosing.
- Through completion of their TAP, 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 TAP analyses to the class in conference-style panel presentations, comparing and contrasting their findings with those of their peers.

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 a foreign country or culture.

Active learning has long been recognized for its educational value. In classes where case studies, simulations, role plays and other practice-based activities are used effectively, students gain knowledge and become more proficient in analyzing information. Cognitive psychologists have shown that learning and memory are directly influenced by how deeply we process new knowledge. When provided opportunities to summarize, explain, apply, and question new information, students are more likely to remember it later when needed (McKeachie, 2002). Active learning through in-depth case analysis also increases tolerance for ambiguity and fosters student growth in understanding complicated concepts in more comprehensive ways (Wassermann, 1994). 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 comprehensive Travel Analysis Portfolio (TAP).

Description of the Activity

At the beginning of the semester, students choose a foreign country or culture they would be interested in visiting or learning about in depth. Students construct a detailed portfolio 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 TAP consists of several individual components that students draft, revisit, and revise progressively throughout the semester. The components of the TAP are adaptable to different course structures and instructor preferences, but suggested components are described below following a general overview of the flow of this assignment.

Overview of TAP from Beginning to End

Within the first two weeks of the semester, the instructor invites students to 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, they can begin researching and completing components of the TAP in coordination with the course schedule of weekly readings and topics discussed in class. Students complete and submit short travel journal assignments every few weeks to enable the instructor to track their progress and provide feedback on their projects to date. Students complete their TAP 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 one- or two-inch three-ring binder 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, scrapbooking materials, 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). An optional extra credit component, depending on time and facilities, is a potluck where students bring a traditional food item from their portfolio culture to share with the class during the panel presentations. The instructor may choose to provide paper plates, bowls, napkins, plastic utensils, etc. to lessen the financial burden on students.

Suggested Components of the TAP

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/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>

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 Strodbeck, and Edward T. Hall. Instructors can choose from several different cultural value dimension frameworks (see Bhawuk, 2017) for this portion of the TAP. 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 TAP. 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.

Verbal and Nonverbal Communication Expectations

As a project specifically designed for use in intercultural communication-related courses, a key component of the TAP 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 TAP 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 TAP cultures.

Useful Glossary

Students research words or phrases that a visitor to their TAP culture would find most helpful to know. Organized as a quick reference sheet, the alphabetized glossary includes practical words and phrases like asking where to find a bathroom or an ATM. Key slang words, especially those that differ from the student's native language and/or U.S. American English usage of a word, are also appropriate for this quick guide. The quick guide is distinct from the more analytical section described above on verbal and nonverbal communication expectations.

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 TAP, students provide a list of 7-10 news articles (English translations when necessary) that report on current events directly affecting their TAP 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.

Logistics of the Travel Plan

Further enhancing the reality of the exercise, another component that can be included is a travel budget and itinerary. Here students identify specific travel dates, research transportation costs to and from a visit to the culture, specify a travel itinerary of the places they will go and activities they will do, and investigate lodging and dining options. Students are encouraged to

choose one of two routes in their planning: (1) create a budget and itinerary for their ideal visit where money is no object, or (2) create a budget and itinerary for a trip they can imagine being able to afford either now or in the not-too-distant-future.

Other logistical information might include currency exchange rates, electricity voltage conversion for charging or operating their electronic devices, and other helpful culture-specific travel advice found online or in books. This component of the TAP uniquely serves to place students imaginatively in the mindset of making concrete plans for a personalized sojourn to a foreign destination, heightening the realism of the activity and increasing their investment in the project.

Travel Journal Entries

The travel journal entries are the primary means by which the instructor is able to ensure students are working on their TAP over the course of the semester and provide them with progressive feedback. The number and content of the prompts provided for students' travel journal entries is adaptable to the course content and the instructor's preferences. 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. A sample list of topics for journal prompts includes the following: (1) Preparedness for change; (2) Progress-to-date; (3) Interpreting and transmitting messages; and (4) Notes from those who have gone before. An example of a journal entry assignment description is provided as an appendix. In short, the first prompt listed above 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 (appendix) 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 TAP 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.

How many entries, and how often students are asked to submit them for feedback, is a matter of instructor preference and will depend on factors such as class size. Generally, in a class of up to 30 students, four entries collected three times during semester—the first two at midterm, the third two weeks later, and the fourth concurrent with the final portfolio—is a manageable amount of grading and a sufficient amount of feedback to keep students' progress on track. The feedback provided to students on their journal entries (particularly those leading up to submission of the final portfolio) should be specific and detailed, alerting them to deficiencies in their understanding or application of the ideas. Students should be encouraged to ask questions they have about the feedback and revise their travel journal entries immediately after receiving the instructor's comments. Final revised versions of the entries are included in the TAP submitted at the end of the semester.

Annotated Bibliography

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Students' final projects should also include an annotated bibliography of 10-15 credible and highly useful resources for information on their specific TAP culture (e.g., books, films, websites). All sources of information used in the construction of the TAP, including course readings, should be cited in-text throughout the portfolio 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.

Debriefing

Although periodic check-ins throughout the semester (i.e., through formal feedback on the travel journal entries and informal class discussions) provide opportunities to communicate with students individually and as a group about what they are learning and how it relates to researching their TAP cultures, the final debriefing takes place when students present their TAP projects in class. Students present on conference-style panels arranged in advance by the instructor according to regional themes like "Western Europe," and "South America and the Caribbean." Panels should have at least three panelists, but no more than six, to keep the rest of the class engaged for the duration of a panel. Depending on the number of students and amount of class time available for TAP presentations, panelists can simply present a few highlights from their research (5 minutes each) or can prepare more formal conference-style presentations with visual aids (12 minutes each). A question and answer period for the presenters follows each panel. The instructor should use these periods to help students (particularly the panelists) draw connections among the cultures presented in search of themes, unique cases, and to encourage critical thinking about why and how cultures vary.

As an optional extra credit opportunity, students can be encouraged to prepare a traditional food item from their TAP culture to share with classmates in a potluck that takes place during and in between the panel presentations. Experience has shown this to be an effective way to create a celebratory learning atmosphere where students can demonstrate multiple different aptitudes: some will display strong analytical skills in presenting their findings, others will excel in the artistic design of their portfolios, and some will share their talents by creating a delicious culture-specific dish to share with their peers.

Appraisal

This activity provides students a means by which they can apply abstract theories about communication, culture, and cross-cultural variation to practical realities that are of personal interest to them, which research has shown enhances learning and retention of information (McKeachie, 2002). Students are progressively able to integrate and apply what they are learning from course readings, class lectures and discussions, and their own independent research to the concrete task of planning a trip to a specific cultural destination. Learned and applied systematically in this project, the critical thinking skills students develop become increasingly intuitive and accessible for future application in their everyday encounters with "strangers."

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Appendix

Travel Journal Entry 2: Progress to Date

This is the second of four travel journal entry prompts you will be asked to respond to and include in your Travel Analysis Portfolio end-of-term project. The journal entry prompts will be provided to you throughout the semester and will roughly coincide in content with topics being covered in the course readings and discussions. You should complete each journal entry within a week of the time you receive the prompt. Periodically, I will ask you to submit your journal-entries to-date for feedback and a project progress grade.

Journal entries should be a minimum of three (3) pages typed and double-spaced, using 12-point Times New Roman font with uniform 1-inch margins. The number and title of each journal entry should be identified in a header. Your name should also be placed in the header. Page numbers should be centered in a footer. No other identifying information (e.g., course name) should be included.

Journal Entry 2: Progress-to-Date

Your second travel journal entry will reflect on your progress-to-date on the Travel Analysis Portfolio project. By this time, you should already be reading widely and taking notes on materials available from highly credible Internet sources and materials in print from the library, bookstores, etc. on the culture you have chosen to focus on for this project. There are two parts to this journal entry: 1) I would like you to summarize your cultural analysis and current events context findings thus far and 2) present your initial thoughts and plans as to how you are going to organize your portfolio, what materials you plan to include and in what format, and parts/sections of the project you anticipate will be more difficult than others. **First**, in summary form, explain what your early findings are with respect to your cultural analysis. This section will be much more elaborate in your final project, but for this journal entry, I am looking for a brief overview of where your travel culture falls on at least some of the dimensions of cultural variation discussed in the readings and in class. Also (in brief), what are some of the relevant and/or recent news events occurring in your travel country? **Second**, explain how you plan to organize and present your Travel Analysis Portfolio. Be as detailed as possible here, although I recognize your plans may change as you go. What are your initial ideas/plans? What organizational and presentational questions do you have? **Finally, include a separate annotated bibliography page** consisting of at least three (3) credible and useful resources for your project; this page is in addition to the minimum three pages of text for the journal entry.