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Say What You Mean: Confronting Ambiguity in Language

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GIFT:
Say What You Mean: Confronting Ambiguity in Language

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This GIFTS activity involves the juxtaposition of denotative and connotative meanings of the same word in order to demonstrate how complex decoding the code and assigning the encoder's intended meaning to a word can be. Students are randomly put into groups. Students are given the word "dog" and each group uses a dictionary to provide its denotation. Then each group has to generate connotations, cultural or slang meanings for the word "dog." The class discusses the difference between the two types of meaning, and what impact if any this difference has on interpersonal communication. Then each group chooses a word, provides its denotative and connotative meanings, and determines if the meaning in the word is fixed or not. Then as a class we discuss the meanings of the words. Students realize the meaning words have is never fixed. Therefore, the encoder must consider the audience to reduce ambiguity during decoding.

Humans use language to transmit messages or codes. Codes are sent as signals across visual, vocal, and olfactory channels of human communication. The information embedded within these codes is encoded and decoded. The processes of encoding and decoding begin with a source. A source is the origin of the message during human interaction. An encoder is a source of information. The encoder uses language to convey knowledge to the decoder (Devito, 2006). A decoder must observe and listen to the language used. A decoder needs to decipher the meaning embedded in the code. The decoder receives the code, interprets and evaluates the meaning of the code, and the decoder generates feedback that is transmitted back to the source (Devito, 2009). Sometimes encoding and decoding of language is difficult for students to understand. Especially, since the words and gestures we use to convey meaning have multiple meanings. Encoding and decoding is a skill, and students need practice in order to hone their encoding and decoding abilities.

Before students are given their task, a context must be given for the *Great Ideas for Teaching Students (GIFTS)* activity. The goal of the activity is to determine why meaning conveyed in our verbal messages is not "fixed." A verbal message consists of sounds that create a system of word meanings, which are put into meaningful sentence patterns to convey information (Lane, 2010). The conveyance of meaning for verbal messages begins with utterances, then a word or phrase, which are used to create a sentence and sentence patterns (e.g., a paragraph, prose, and a speech). According to O'Hair, Friedrich,

Wiemann, and Wiemann (1997) a competent communicator recognizes the levels of meaning individuals use to communicate, and one's ability to negotiate these levels enables a communicator to interact competently and confidently in various environments.

Negotiation of the levels of meaning is difficult. When communicators interact the words used have multiple meanings. Miscommunication is a result of misunderstanding the meaning being referred to in a conversation. An encoder might construct meaning in a message, whereby the denotation is relevant. A denotation is the dictionary meaning of the word. However, the decoder might decipher the meaning of the message as implying the connotation. A connotation is the slang or cultural meaning of the word. Encoders and decoders must juxtaposition denotative and connotative meanings of words in language used during interaction and determine which meaning fits within the communication context of the communication episode (Devito, 2006, 2009). Communication context frames the communication episode or situation, and it consists of four dimensions (Lane, 2010). The dimensions of context include physical, socio-psychological, temporal, and cultural. The physical dimension is the tangible, concrete boundaries of a space. The socio-psychological dimension involves power and status differences within a relationship. The temporal dimension pertains to the time of day, as well as the management of time throughout the day. The cultural dimension is usually salient given that humanity is interconnected in the 21st century, and the beliefs and values passed down from generation to generation for various groups of people are different, which makes intercultural communication between members of distinct groups complicated.

The cultural dimension underscores the importance of audience analysis. Audience analysis is a process communicators use to analyze the audience, and determine which characteristics of audience members affect the audience's perception of the message (Devito, 2006). For instance, the demographics of an audience, such as, class, religion, education level, and political affiliation are characteristics of decoders in an audience whose interpretation-evaluation of the message is affected by their identity. An encoder who is aware of the demographics of the audience recognizes that certain groups have differing connotations for the same words, and s/he will try to eliminate any ambiguity in the language used. The goal of an encoder is to remove any barriers to communication that inhibit understanding of the intended meaning embedded in the message. The *GIFTS* activity has an audience analysis component.

The GIFTS Activity

The GIFTS activity involves the selection of a different word by each student group. Before the word is chosen each group chooses a leader and a decision-making strategy. The leader facilitates discussion, and delegates tasks within the group. The first priority of the leader is to facilitate the selection of a strategy for making decisions in the group, whereby the group uses decision-by-authority, majority rule, or consensus to make decisions. Decision-by-authority is when one person makes the final decisions. Majority rule involves the group following the course of action chosen by the majority of group

members. Consensus involves all group members agreeing on what they should do before anything is done. Thereafter, each group juxtaposes the denotation(s) and connotation(s) of their word selection.

An example is given in order to clarify the instructions for the activity. Students are given the word "dog" and each group uses a dictionary to provide its denotation. Then each group has to determine who would use the word in conversation, and how is the word being used. Students acknowledge that people from different cultural groups use "dog" in different ways. Sometimes encoders embed the denotative meaning of dog, while others embed one of the myriad connotations. Students recognize that depending on the characteristics of the audience decoders will decipher the meaning of the word differently, which could create miscommunication. The denotation is the same across dictionaries, yet, the connotations change depending on the communicators.

The groups select their words. Then each group participates in a tournament to determine which group can choose a word with the most connotations. During the tournament we use the decision-making strategy majority rule to decide which connotations are valid for each group's word selection. A connotation is valid if the majority of the class believes members of a cultural group use the word in the manner it is being discussed. After the tournament as a class we discuss the difference between the two types of meaning, and what impact if any this difference has on interpersonal communication. Students realize the meaning words have is never fixed. Therefore, the encoder must consider the audience to reduce ambiguity during decoding.

Logistics

Each group needs a dictionary, which can be hard copy or an online version. Students will use these dictionaries to locate and record pertinent denotation(s) for their word selection. Then students will generate a list of connotations for their chosen word. Afterward, the tournament ensues. After a winner is declared there is discussion and a debriefing. The approximate activity time is 75 minutes. In the beginning, 15 minutes are allotted for defining verbal messages, conveyance of meaning, and denotation and connotation. It takes five minutes to review the logistics of the tournament and answer questions. In-class group work takes 20 minutes. The tournament takes 30 minutes. And, discussion, debriefing and wrap-up take another five minutes.

Discussion Questions

There are a variety of questions that can be discussed after the tournament. Here are some examples of questions that address the purpose of the activity and reviews relevant key terms relevant to the discussion about confronting ambiguity in language:

1. *Did you choose a leader for your group and a decision making strategy? What were the implications of your selections?*

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2. *How did you delegate tasks in your group?*

3. *Which key terms from lecture enabled your group to complete the activity?*

4. *What were the similarities and differences between the denotative and connotative meanings?*

5. *How did communication context (the ramifications of the dimensions examined) affect your perception during conveyance of meaning?*

6. *Does culture impact audience analysis of connotations used during interaction? Explain.*

7. *How were your taken-for-granted assumptions challenged?*

Discussion

Language is a powerful tool that enables communication to occur between people. Words are a basic unit of language. Words convey meaning. A competent communicator recognizes that the same word can convey different meanings to different people. The purpose of this GIFTS activity is to empower students, and instill in them the desire to acknowledge those who they communicate with on a daily basis. The encoder needs to understand the decoder, and adapt to one's communicative partner. Students recognize by the end of the activity why it is important for an encoder to develop intercultural communication competence. Intercultural communication competence is achieved when "successful intercultural interaction centers on communication processes among people from different cultures" (Chen & Starosta, 2005, p. 243), involving the effective exchange of language and nonverbal codes. Audience analysis is another useful tool students used during the activity that helped them ascertain how communicators from different cultural groups interpret and evaluate the meanings embedded in the same word. Encoding and decoding language between members of the same cultural group, and across members of different cultural groups is complex, which is why activities like the GIFTS activity are important, due to the useful skills and abilities students develop and hone.

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