

Communication Curriculum

Lesson 6

Cross-Cultural Communication

Lesson Overview:

Students will continue the Communication Curriculum by completing the following steps: 1) screening the Cross-Cultural Communication video and discussing the value and challenges of communicating with people from different backgrounds and cultures 2) creating a model of culture as an iceberg and identifying the aspects of culture that are beneath the surface but that may play a role in communication style 3) considering various dimensions of communication and where their culture and they, themselves, fall within the dimensions.

Communication

Lesson 6 – Cross-Cultural Communication

Lesson Overview

During this lesson, you will guide students to consider how culture plays a role in communication and how cross-cultural communication can be approached for positive and successful results. Students will work together in groups to develop an Iceberg model of culture, determining what can be seen from the outside and what is hidden beneath the surface. Students will also explore various dimensions of communication and will participate in a group activity that will allow them to consider where they fall in their culture and among their peers within these dimensions. The lesson will culminate with students journaling their reflections about the exercises and learning.

Time Frame:

1½-2 hours

Core Concepts:

- People in STEM careers often find themselves working with others from different countries and cultures.
- An open mind and awareness of how cultural factors may influence communication can be helpful in making cross-cultural communication less frustrating and more successful and enjoyable.
- Awareness of one's own cultural and communication characteristics can also help make cross-cultural communication more effective.

Lesson Objectives:

In this lesson students will:

- Explore the impact of culture (both visible and unseen facets) on communication.
- Consider how culture and personality affects our communication styles and perceptions.

Materials Needed:

- [Lesson 6 Video: Cross-Cultural Communication](#)
- Photocopies of Cultural Iceberg Worksheet OR poster paper with an iceberg drawn on it. 1 per group of 3 to 4 students
- Post-it notes (optional if using poster paper for Cultural Iceberg activity)
- Photocopies of Cultural Dimensions Worksheet 1 per student
- Sheets of paper with the Cultural Dimension continua ends written on them and tape to post them on the wall at the ends of the room.

Part 1: Introduction to Cross-Cultural Communication and STEM**Step 1: Introduce the Lesson**

(1 minute)

Explain to students that in this lesson they will explore the importance and challenges of cross-cultural communication. They will consider how they can overcome these challenges to become better communicators and to lead to success in STEM careers.

Step 2: Activate Prior Knowledge

(5-10 minutes)

Ask students to consider a time when they had to communicate with someone very different from themselves. It may have been a person from a different country, culture, or maybe just a different city or community. Ask students to journal for 5 minutes using this prompt:

What challenges did you face in talking to a person who was different from you? How did you overcome these challenges? What challenges were difficult to overcome, and why?

Offer students an opportunity to share out their experience or to read what they wrote with the class. Some experiences or reflections may be personal, so it is best not to *require* a public sharing.

Step 3: Present the Cross-Cultural Communication video

(15 minutes)

Facilitate a discussion after viewing the video. You may wish to solicit questions and comments from the students first. You can use these suggested discussion points to deepen the conversation and student thinking:

- Consider a career or field that you might like to pursue. Why might cross-cultural communication be important in that career or field?
- What are some other examples of international or cross-cultural collaborations that you know of? In general? In STEM?
- After watching the video, what ideas do you have for improving or explaining the challenges you journaled about?
- What is culture?

- How can culture affect the way we communicate and what we communicate about?
- Which do you think plays a bigger role in how you communicate: your culture or your personality and personal communication style? Give evidence for your answer.

Part 2: Cultural Iceberg

Step 1: Cultural Iceberg Brainstorm

(10-15 minutes)

Remind students that the video explained that culture can be like an iceberg. Others can only see the small portion that pokes out above the water, but the majority of the iceberg (and the majority of our culture) is hidden beneath the surface. Our outward appearance may give away some of our culture. None the less, the aspects of our culture that remain unseen can impact our behavior and communication.

Divide students into groups of 3 or 4. Provide a Cultural Iceberg Worksheet or poster for each group. Post the following questions on the board or project onto a screen and ask students to reflect silently on the questions for 30 seconds:

1. *What can people know about you just from looking at you or hearing you speak?*
2. *What might not be obvious unless someone knows you well or asks?*

After giving adequate think time, ask students to work together with their group to write their answers to Question 1 on their iceberg *above* the waterline. Their responses to Question 2 should be written *below* the waterline on the iceberg. Allow groups five to 10 minutes to discuss differences of opinion and to continue brainstorming additional ideas.

*Optional if using posters: During think time, ask students to write their responses on Post-It notes (one idea per note). When groups meet together, they can stick their ideas onto the poster. Ideas can be moved around given discussion and new ideas can be added to additional Post-It notes.

Step 2: The Wandering Critic

(15 minutes)

Use a “Three Stay, One Stray” protocol to provide an opportunity for groups to share their

cultural icebergs, give/receive feedback, and to update their iceberg models accordingly. If groups are smaller or larger than four members, all but one member “stays”.

Protocol:

1. Ask each group to designate one member to be the “Wandering Critic”.
2. Wandering Critics should choose another group to “stray” to (one critic per group).
3. Groups should explain their Cultural Iceberg models to the visiting critics.
4. Wandering Critics should ask questions and offer constructive feedback or ideas.
5. Wandering Critics return to their original groups and share out about the other Iceberg that they saw.
6. Repeat steps 1-5 with new critics visiting new groups. Repeat depending on time and number of groups.
7. Provide time at the end for groups to revise their Cultural Icebergs based on what they have learned from other groups.

Step 3: Large Group Discussion

(10-15 minutes)

Use one or more of the discussion questions listed to facilitate a discussion based on the Cultural Iceberg activity. Encourage students to use evidence from their own experiences to back up their claims. At that same time, caution them to consider other points of view as valid evidence, as well. If large group discussion is slow and/or dominated by a small handful of voices, consider switching to a Think-Pair-Share protocol for a few of the discussion questions to engage more of the group.

Questions for discussion:

- Which portion of the iceberg was easiest to fill in? Why?
- How much of what influences our communication may be hidden beneath the surface?
- How is the Iceberg model helpful for approaching cross-cultural communication (communication between people from different backgrounds)?
- What might be the consequences of ignoring or not being aware of the submerged part of the Cultural Iceberg?
- How do the submerged aspects of your own Cultural Iceberg affect the ways that

you perceive others?

- What ideas do you have for overcoming the challenge that so much of someone's culture (and motivations for the way they communicate) may be hidden from view?
- Does the iceberg model have any weaknesses? If so, what are they?
- Consider the experience you journaled about at the beginning of the lesson. How could the Iceberg activity help you address the challenges you faced in that interaction?
- What is one key takeaway that you found valuable from this activity?
- How will you use this idea the next time that you are communicating with someone different from yourself?

Part 3: Considering the Dimensions of Culture

Step 1: Review Cultural Dimensions

(10 minutes)

Pass out the Cultural Dimensions Worksheet.

Remind students that it can be helpful to think about communication in terms of dimensions when dealing with cross-cultural communication. Review the dimensions mentioned in the video.

Offer students the opportunity to explain each of the continua before explaining them, yourself. Reference the Dimensions of Communication info sheet at the end of this lesson for additional information.

Step 2: Cultural Dimensions Worksheet

(5 minutes)

Ask students to consider each of the continua on the Cultural Dimensions worksheet. Have them mark a dot where they think their culture (as defined by them) falls on each continuum. Have them mark a star where they think they, personally, fall on the continua.

Step 3: Full Group – Full Body Continuum

(15 minutes)

Explain to the students that each end of the room represents one of the ends of a cultural

dimension continuum. You may wish to write or post the words on each end of the room. Starting with the Direct vs. Indirect continuum, ask students to silently stand and line up or situate themselves physically along the classroom continuum. Once all students are in place, ask them to turn and talk to one or two other students nearby to explain why they placed themselves there.

Other topics for small group discussion in the line or afterward might also include:

- Are you surprised at who is close to you on the continuum? Why or why not?
- Based on feedback from others around you, would you adjust your spot on the continuum if given the opportunity?
- Is your spot along the continuum relative to others in the room? Or is it relative to others in your family or your culture? Or is it relative to something else?
- Look around at the entire room. Are there any surprises? Do our perceptions of ourselves sometimes differ from other people's perceptions of us? How might our culture impact our perceptions of ourselves and of others?

After a short discussion period for the Direct vs. Indirect continuum, repeat the activity for each of the other continua on the Cultural Dimensions Worksheet. Allow time during each continuum for small group discussion between nearby students.

After going through each of the continua, ask students to return to their seats and share any observations or takeaways they have from the experience.

Step 4: Reflection Journaling

(5-10 minutes)

Ask students to reflect on the Cultural Dimensions activities by journaling a response to the following prompt:

How can understanding the cultural and personal dimensions of yourself and others help you to communicate and work together better?

Dimensions of Communication

It can sometimes be helpful to think about communication in terms of dimensions. Each dimension can be viewed on a continuum, or spectrum, and can help to put outward behavior into a cultural context.

While there are many dimensions to communication within culture, there are a few that may be especially helpful for putting the behavior of others (and even your own behavior) into context.

Direct vs. Indirect – Direct cultures value simple, frank communication. People from these cultures tend to confront issues in a straight-forward manner. People from more indirect cultures may find direct communication rude or harsh, as they tend to be more discreet in their communications and avoid confrontation. In more discreet cultures, the listener may have to listen carefully to interpret the true meaning of what is being said. An indirect speaker may not overtly say the word, “no”, but may deflect the question in a way that others in the same culture understand to mean “no.”

Fast vs. Slow – Speed can refer to both the pace of the conversation, as well as the expected response time. A fast communicator may want the conversation to move at a quick pace, sometimes even cutting someone off in midsentence to keep things going. They may also expect a quick response time in terms of a decision or a response to a request. In today’s highly connected world, they may expect immediate responses (same day or less) to e-mail or text messages. In slower cultures, it is okay for people to take their time to respond to requests. Time is taken to think or talk things out to come to a solution. Speaking slowly and clearly can be valued and even be seen as a sign of a well-educated person.

Verbose vs. Laconic – Verbose cultures use stories to convey meaning or understanding. They use a lot of words and conversations tend to be long and involved. Laconic cultures use fewer words to express ideas and thoughts. Conversations are usually short and language is precise and descriptive. In these cultures a laconic speaker is seen to have a sense of dignity and quietness is valued.

Assertive vs. Polite – In assertive cultures, outward signs of confidence and individual strength are valued. It is quite acceptable to state one's opinion openly. Assertive speakers may appear to be arguing when they are merely discussing the matter. In polite cultures it is more valued to avoid confrontation and to converse tactfully and diplomatically.

Emotional vs. Rational – In emotional cultures it is perfectly normal to see and hear gesturing, crying, yelling and other demonstrative actions during a conversation – both in private, as well as in public. Emotion is seen as an important element of communication. People in rational cultures tend to avoid showing any emotion at all. Emotion is seen as counterproductive to solving an issue.

Formal vs. Casual – Formal communicators recognize and value hierarchy and defer communication to those in higher positions of power or authority. There are clear rules of who may speak to whom and what type of language should be used. Casual cultures are less concerned with formality and hierarchy. Body language can also be seen along the formal to casual spectrum as certain gestures and actions can be seen as more or less respectful or may imply greater levels of comfort or casualty.

Frequent vs. Infrequent – Cultures that value collective decision-making tend to have more frequent conversations. Where decision-making is seen as an independent action, the culture tends to have less frequent conversations. Frequency may also show up in the number of questions that someone feels comfortable asking, how comfortable people feel in asking for clarification, and how many people are involved in a conversation.

Of course, not all individuals within a culture will communicate at exactly the same point along each spectrum. People have different temperaments and personalities. Thinking in generalizations can be helpful to put behavior in context or perspective. However, when generalizations are biased or demonstrate judgment, they become stereotypes. Not only can stereotypes be hurtful, but they can become a roadblock to successful cross-cultural communication.