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“Involve me, and I will learn.” Interactive metaphors in intercultural communication training.

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Abstract

Much intercultural training focuses on behaving correctly in a specific target culture. In workshops and seminars, trainees learn rules of behavior and engage in roleplay to practice them right. Such rules are, indeed, very helpful bits of information, especially during one’s first careful steps within an unknown culture. They can provide valuable guidelines for mastering standard situations in the initial days and weeks. But what training courses often fail to convey is the non-standard, interactive, and dialogical nature of intercultural encounters: they take place between actual people (not between “cultures”). Anyone spending more than a vacation abroad realizes that intercultural communication is not linear theory but complex reality. The demands on the intercultural traveler are as diverse as the people involved. Intercultural communicative competence is not limited to the ability to reproduce and follow a memorized set of rules: since no two encounters are exactly alike, they cannot be solved in the same manner. Hence it is essential to help trainees develop a flexible, personal intercultural communication style to solve the many non-standard situations when rules fail them.

The use of interactive metaphors, i.e., experiential learning activities, in intercultural communication training allows trainees to develop their own individual techniques of intercultural problem-solving by enhancing their communication skills. During these activities, trainees solve complex tasks by communicating effectively. Not directly confronted with a different culture, they make authentic and valuable experiences in a relaxed, positive, and productive learning environment. In helping them generalize these experiences and conclusions into strategies, trainers can help foster intercultural flexibility and create long-lasting insights. With this talk we wish to give you an idea of how these interactive metaphors work, and show you some ways of integrating them into intercultural training.

Transcript

Have you ever looked up a quote on the internet? You were to give a speech, wanted to start with a funny or witty remark by a really smart person. There are databases on the internet with 1000s of quotes. When you've found the right one, you will want to know who it's from, to make it important. Now we all know that the origins of a large number of quotes are unknown. But since you need an author to make it sound important, the databases will always tell you someone: it will usually say something like "by Gandhi" or "by Martin Luther King" or "by Plato" or "by Paris Hilton" – the truth is, nobody really knows.

The one we would like to begin our talk today with is, in this sense, "by Benjamin Franklin."

*Tell me, and I will forget.
Teach me, and I may remember.
Involve me, and I will learn.*

So we're talking about involvement today. We're talking about the active, the practical side of intercultural education. Why involve people in intercultural training? There are plenty of great theories out there. And there are even more models, didactical methods, and other creative ways of teaching them to people.

To answer this question: "How does practice compare to theory?" we would like to invite you to a little experiment in a moment.

Just talking about interactivity is like sending a postcard from a really great vacation to your friends – "The weather's great, wish you could be here!" We're going to take you there! We would like to invite you to become active from time to time. You will have the opportunity to experience, first-hand, interactive metaphors we designed specifically for intercultural awareness training. Are you ready? Here's the experiment.

[At this point, we brought a regular bicycle into the room and set it on top of a table so everyone could see. The pedals were at a 90° angle to the ground. We tied a shoestring to the one pedal pointing down, then asked the audience to take a guess: If we pulled this string backwards, i.e. in the direction of the bike's rear wheel, which way would the bicycle move – forward, backwards, or not at all? In a brief opinion poll, about 90 % of the audience decided on one solution (we're not going to give away which). We then asked one gentleman to stand up, come to the front, and pull the string. Much to the amazement of many, the bike started moving in the direction opposite of what almost everyone had expected.]

It's evident that practice plays a big role whenever we wish to really understand something. Interactive metaphors are a great way of bringing such practice into intercultural education.

What do we mean by "interactive metaphors?" A metaphor, first of all, is a figure of speech, in which one phrase is used instead of another. It suggests a similarity or likeness between the two. The term comes from the Greek word for "to transfer." Metaphors are used abundantly in intercultural communication training, one of the most common examples probably being that of peaches and coconuts when comparing US Americans to Germans.

Americans often tend to be outgoing, easy to start a conversation with, and likable – but it takes a much longer time to establish a real, deep relationship. They are therefore referred to as “peaches” – soft on the outside, but it’s hard to get into the core.

Germans, on the other hand, are often perceived by foreign nationals to be a little roughish in manner and tone, not very talkative, perhaps even impolite – but once a German calls you friend, it’s forever. That’s why they are sometimes called “coconuts” – hard on the outside, but all soft inside.

Another well-known example is the cultural “iceberg” which visualizes cultures as having an observable part (language, traditions, clothing style, etc.) and a much larger, invisible part underneath the water surface (norms, values, beliefs, etc.).

We use “metaphor” in a **wider sense** here, more like an **allegory**: An event with a certain story line, in which every person involved and everything that happens has a symbolic meaning.

Now, what makes a metaphor interactive? A **“standard” metaphor** has a **predetermined structure**. For example, metaphors often take the form of stories: Someone is faced with a problem – finds a solution – and that’s the moral of the story.

So suppose you were the receivers, and I was the sender, and I was going to send you such a metaphor: There would be exactly two ways for you to react – you could either accept it or reject it, depending on whether it makes sense to you. We can refer to such metaphors as having a **CLOSED structure**.

Bringing **interaction** into metaphors loosens these rigid structures, creating **OPEN structures**. In an interactive metaphor, I present you with a problem – a task, a riddle, whatever you want to call it – and then it’s up to you to discover the solution! As a trainer or instructor, I only guide you through the process.

You don’t have to accept a predefined solution by me – but instead, you, as a group or as a person, draw your own conclusions. And of course that conclusion will make a lot more sense to you than any one I could give you – because it’s your own! You made it!

My job as a trainer in this case is only to ask you lots of questions to check and see if your conclusion is sound and solid and useful for you – or if it needs reworking.

You may be wondering what such an interactive metaphor may look like, what it may feel like. I promised you some action earlier, and now is the time for you to get active again. Don’t worry – no need to stand up – the only muscles we’re going to be working are the ones inside your heads!

[We confronted the group with three different photographs we projected on the wall. Depicted on the first was a structure of steel, chimneys, and exhaust fumes, possibly a factory or a power plant. Upon asking the group what feelings this image evoked in them, we got a very unanimous, very negative response. The second picture showed two persons in bathing suits reclining on a beach. On an imaginary scale from 1 to 10, this image was given a much higher comfort rating. It was clearly

a more pleasant view than that of the power plant. Finally, we revealed the third picture: The two sunbathers, along with other tourists, right in front of the steel structure. The two previous pictures had been cuttings from one and the same photograph! The group was confused, then tried to give the situation some possible meaning – were these people crazy, they asked. Was it even a real picture, or just a fake? The solution: The place the image was taken is called the Blue Lagoon, an all-natural health spa in Iceland. These people were not crazy, but instead paying about \$30 a day just to be there. And the power plant? All geothermal and clean.

In the ensuing discussion, we presented the group with the question of how they had come to their early – and wrong – conclusions. The results were very enlightening with regards to the issue of stereotyping in intercultural communication: everyone had experienced – through their own eyes – how important it always is to see the “bigger picture,” literally.]

That was one interactive metaphor to show you how this concept works. Now let’s shed some light on the process behind the activity. Let’s take this interactive metaphor apart – into all its constituent parts – and analyze what actually just happened during this exercise. If you want, you can lean back comfortably in your chairs to get a more distanced view at the experience we just had.

- 1) The type of metaphor used in this example is called **isomorphic**, another word borrowed from the Greek, meaning “having the same shape.” What this means is that the process that you all just experienced – judging a situation by the information you have – is the same as in intercultural encounters:

When confronted with foreign ways and customs, our mind does exactly the same thing: It takes the information at hand, then generalizes it, then judges it. All this usually happens within a very short time.

For example, a traveler from Britain going to Italy may make the observation that the people there often touch, embrace, even kiss each other – even if they don’t know each other so well. That is step one. This often leads to a generalization: “The Italians are a very touchy-feely people” – step two. And within seconds, the brain arrives at step three: judging the generalization. Coming from Great Britain, where touching is reserved for good friends and family, the traveler may feel repulsed, judging “the Italians” to be obnoxious and lacking a sense of decency.

Only if that person were to learn about Italian culture, she or he would see the big picture – literally!, like in the exercise – and understand that a) not all Italians are like that, and b) there are reasons for this behavior deeply rooted in Italian culture.

So, once again, an isomorphic metaphor allows you to experience not the exact same situation as in an intercultural encounter, but the same process.

- 2) Speaking of experiences: this brings us to the 2nd asset of interactive metaphors. The isomorphic structure of this metaphor has given you the chance to have an **actual experience**.

In contrast to theoretical teachings, which aim at our cognitive thinking, and thus only activate a very small part of our brain, an experience is also tied to physical sensations – even an experience like this one, which took place only inside your heads:

- You experienced it “live,” with your own eyes, from a first-person perspective. You DID have a feeling of temperature / of touch.
- When I asked you to “open the window” and breathe in the fumes – some of you even made faces! Perhaps you even had a sensation of smell.
- And – possibly the strongest sensation – you had a feeling of comfort and discomfort. We even measured it, on a scale from 1 to 10!

We call such an experience a **synaesthetic** experience, because it addresses not just our cognition, but all our senses instead. Now, when I tell you that the greater part of interactive metaphors also involve physical activity, touch and movement, imagine how absorbed you can get in such a setting! The more senses an exercise activates, the better it will be remembered, because the brain can access information more easily if it is linked to certain feelings.

While we're at it: This is also the main difference between interaction metaphors and roleplay. I'm sure all of you who have worked with roleplay before have had some similar experiences: Often, the ideas behind those plays are often very good, very thoughtful. There are great roleplays with intricate designs, with great attention paid to detail, really original storylines – all to create a world in which the players can feel “real.” And yet – many players have a hard time acting like they would in real life, because they are focused on playing a role, and that feels unnatural. Any experiences they make are seen through that “unrealistic” filter and therefore do not mean very much to them personally. The minority of participants become so absorbed in a roleplay that they actually start feeling it.

An interactive metaphor does not have this problem: there are no roles; hence, people (as the actual persons they are) work together, communicate with each other and find solutions and strategies together. The sensation is **authentic**, because “I as myself have solved this task, and this is my personal strategy: ...”

So **authenticity** is a main asset of interactive metaphors.

A crucial part of this specific experience here was – of course – your realization that your first judgment was wrong (only the people who know about the Blue Lagoon don't fall for it). From feedback that our seminar groups have given us, we have found out that many of them remember making that misjudgment and learning from it. Through this experience, they have become aware of their own ability to misinterpret a situation, the fact that this can happen to anyone, and have realized that it makes sense to be more careful in the future.

- 3) Learning from mistakes and finding better solutions to problems is another core asset of interactive metaphors. If these mistakes happen in real life, the results can be very uncomfortable, and, in business, even very costly.

And still, if you want to learn how to swim, you have to jump in the water. And as you know, the intercultural waters are very deep, and there are many sharks, and many icebergs.

So what these interactive metaphors do is provide you with a kind of “beginners’ pool” instead, where the water reaches up only to your waist, and you can learn to swim but not really drown. And if somehow you do begin to sink, the trainer or instructor is always there at the side of the pool – like David Hasselhoff in Baywatch – ready to get you out of there.

These are safe conditions, and you can encounter new situations and develop your own strategies, and there is no risk – something like this is called a **third space**: a place or a situation in which real people solve real problems, and there is no pressure, and there are no sanctions – so there are no “wrong choices.” Either way they choose, they will learn.

- 4) And this is another concept inherent in these interactive metaphors: **“Learning by doing.”**

Humans have one great advantage over computers: non-linear thinking! An example: Say, someone stole your mobile phone and wanted to find your PIN code to unlock it. If he was using a very simple computer for it, what would it do? It would try all 4-digit numbers between 0000 and 9999, a linear process, the method of **“trial and error.”** That would be a highly inefficient method, because you know what happens when you enter the wrong number 3 times – the phone is locked.

Now, if the thief used his own brain instead, he might do the following: From the hundreds of phones he’s stolen before he would make the generalization that 99% of people use their birthday as their PIN code. So he would adapt his strategy from stealing your phone to stealing your wallet, too. He would find your driver’s licence, find your birthday, and unlock your phone. And if, over time, it became customary for people to use a different number, for example their ZIP code or anything – he would realize there is a new pattern, and adapt his strategy again. In a way, adapting **becomes** his strategy. And that’s non-linear thinking, also called **“learning by doing.”**

What does this mean for a prospective intercultural traveler in a seminar? It means that by doing something, by solving problems and finding solutions, s/he learns to develop her or his personal strategies to deal with difficult intercultural situations. And that’s the central point: to deal with any intercultural situation, even if all cultural models and dimensions and standards can’t explain it, these strategies will still be there – one can apply them to **any** new situation.

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