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Lectio praecursoria

Communicating interculturality in the world of work

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*Lectio praecursoria puheviestinnän väitöskirjaksi tarkoitetun tutkimuksen **Communicating interculturality in the workplace** tarkastustilaisuudessa Jyväskylän yliopistossa 24.10.2015. Vastaväittäjänä toimi professori Fred Dervin (Helsingin yliopisto) ja kustoksena professori Maarit Valo.*

Within the increasingly pluralistic social landscape, the workplace has emerged as a critical site where persons who come from different countries or speak different languages work together and get to know one another. Such workplace interactions are usually described as instances of “intercultural communication.”

A bulk of workplace interactions occur in the context of workplace relationships that develop through temporally extended communication as people perform work together. Contemporary working life increasingly features small groups and teams. A team is a small group of people with complementary expertise who work interdependently towards shared goals. The proliferation of modern communication technologies has led to the rise of dispersed teams whose members operate from different locations and collaborate primarily in technology-mediated ways.

The workplace is not a mere container for interactions. It is a social space that prescribes specific roles and actions, and suffuses them with considerations of professional and organisational identification, and with economic and political implications. Needless to say, the theme of intercultural communication at work has encouraged intense scholarly interest.

The field of intercultural inquiry is multidisciplinary, and theoretically and methodologically diverse. Terms such as intercultural, cross-cultural, culturally diverse or multicultural are used to denote complementary and contradictory approaches. To orient oneself in this swampy terrain, one should consider the ontological assumptions about “culture” underpinning research. Investigations can be divided into those that see culture as socially constructed and those that see it as an objective entity.

This latter view continues to form the backbone of mainstream intercultural communication scholarship. Culture is treated as a stable system of communicative traits and underlying cognitive patterns territorially bound to a nation-state or an ethnic group; a natural attribute carried by all the group members in mostly unrecognised ways and expressed through a national language. Intercultural communication is thus viewed as an arena where cultural differences are manifested.

The ways that intercultural communication in the workplace has been framed are further informed by two approaches to organisational diversity that emerged in the US: anti-discrimination and diversity management. Anti-discrimination originated in the political struggles of civil rights and women’s movements in the 1960s and 70s. It recognises that certain cultural groups have been historically discriminated against in organisational life. Diversity management arose in the late 1980s as a neo-liberal response to anti-discrimination. It posits that organisations can benefit from cultural differences possessed by their employees.

Although the two approaches espouse radically different social and political ideals, both place an emphasis on fixed culturally specific qualities and experiences. They can be easily integrated with the predominant understanding of culture as an objective entity. The effects of this union are reflected in the popular theoretical frameworks of information and decision-making, social identity and categorisation, and modern critical theorising.

The information and decision-making framework examines how cultural differences among employees improve or disturb organisational performance. The social identity and categorisation framework considers different cultural memberships as triggering the formation of subgroups that hinders organisational efficiency. The critical modern framework uncovers the systemic oppression of culturally non-mainstream employees that undermines their wellbeing and efficiency.

When these frameworks are put together, one can see how intercultural workplace communication has been treated as a “double-edged sword.” It has been approached as either an organisational challenge (“culturally

diverse workplaces are fret with misunderstandings, conflicts and discrimination”) or an organisational resource (“representatives of different national cultures bring diverse know-how that enables better solutions”).

Research goals, methodologies and main findings

My research originates in dissatisfaction with the limited and polarised storylines about intercultural communication at work. These frameworks ignore the social construction of identities, the complexities of human interaction and the pluralisation of ways of life enabled by globalisation.

Entering the field of inquiry through the discipline of interpersonal communication, I am interested in the symbolic ways through which identities and social realities are constructed and negotiated between and among people. I work with the concept of interculturality, viewing it as a process in which individuals produce and interpret subjective and intersubjective constructions of cultural identities in specific communication situations. It is at the level of interpersonal communication that interculturality may emerge as cultural memberships may (or may not) become relevant. I aim to develop an understanding of how people may perceive interculturality and how they may perform interculturality in their interpersonal interactions at work. I am interested in memberships in national, ethnic and language groups. By exploring these memberships with alternative tools, I want to engage in a debate with the traditional scholarship.

I examine interpersonal interactions in relationships between peer co-workers, subordinates, supervisors and business partners, in small groups and teams, and in encounters with customers. I zoom in on such workplace contexts and arrangements as temporary migrant industrial work, expert knowledge work and internationally dispersed teaming.

My study comprises four articles. The first article is a critical literature review that aims to determine what research approaches have been employed in existing scholarship to deal with culture and cultural memberships in workplace interactions. The data set consists of 110 empirical articles published in English in international peer-reviewed journals.

Three research perspectives on the workplace as a site for intercultural communication are identified: cultural difference, intercultural negotiation and inequality in workplace communication. National, ethnic and linguistic memberships tend to be conceptualised as encompassing a finite

set of traits shared by all group members and revealed in communication. Drawing on the emergent trends in scholarship, the following suggestions for future inquiries are made: abandoning the polarised understanding of cultural difference, increased use of naturally occurring data and moving away from descriptions of national and ethnic cultures.

The remaining three articles are empirical research reports. My second and third article draw on the framework of critical constructivism. Critical constructivism explores the emergent and dynamic character of interculturality by constructing thick descriptions of social realities as discussed by social actors. The approach is sensitive to ideologies that enter communication in multiple fragmented ways.

The second article is based on nine open-ended interviews with employees of a Finnish recruitment agency and metal workers from Poland recruited by the agency. I ask how temporary migrant workers and the persons they work with in their foreign workplace perceive developing interpersonal relationships with each other.

The respondents talked about a number of motives and related behaviours for and against developing such relationships. These are grouped into four themes: managing the lack of a common language, interpersonal network imbalance, expectations of good workplace relationships, and understanding the role of culture in relational development.

Interpersonal relationships were perceived as an important aspect of one's working life experience. The ability to share information about oneself enabled through a common language was understood as central to relational development, as was collaborating on joint tasks. Nationality and language were the key dimensions through which the respondents constructed difference and commonality. Their accounts also pointed to the social and economic injustice inherent in the dynamics of international labour migration.

In my third article, I work with ten open-ended interviews with highly-skilled female Russian immigrants in Finland who perform interaction-intense knowledge work. I am interested in how Russian identity matters to my respondents as they make meanings about their workplace interactions.

In the analysis, I identified four communication sites for distinct formations of cultural identity: expressing professionalism, managing initial encounters, facing stigma, and facilitating intercultural learning. Each of my respondents experienced her unique Russian identities through interactions between and among her sense of self, her enactments and relationships embedded in a specific work community. Descriptions

of situations where cultural identities were seen as meaningful were intertwined with those where the interaction was not understood as intercultural.

In my fourth article, I draw on the framework of ethnomethodology and view communication as a publicly available interactional process unfolding between persons. I study when and how culture is made visible by interactants.

My data set consists of records of Skype™ chat conversations of a four-member team embedded in a Finnish organisation. Two team members were co-located in the organisation's central office in Finland, spoke Finnish as their first language, and Russian as a second language. The other two team members worked in the organisation's representative office in Russia, and spoke Russian and Finnish as their first and second language respectively.

I explore how the participants share cultural knowledge in their chat conversations through categorising themselves and the others as “cultural knowers” and “not knowers.” Four recurring ways of sharing cultural knowledge were identified: consultation, review, interpretation, and clarification.

My participants exhibited concern for monitoring mutual understanding. The other's cultural knowledge was routinely accessed in addressing emergent work-related problems. However, the participants did not combine their cultural expertise to create innovative solutions. In my data, one could be a “cultural knower” without having a background in the specific cultural group; by the same token, one's national or linguistic background was not taken as an indicator of absolute cultural authority.

Discussion

My findings warrant a few observations. First of all, the communication of interculturality is dynamic. National, ethnic and linguistic identities may emerge as relevant in different ways for different people in different situations. They can be revised and manipulated. Pinning their “content” down to a finite description of national values and communication traits seems futile and unhelpful.

The workplace context is consequential for the communication of interculturality. Interculturality may be communicated differently in knowledge-intensive and manual work, in established relationships with one's colleagues and one-off encounters with customers, or in temporary and long-term working arrangements. Shared professional and

organisational identities, shared tasks, goals and commitments, shared past and orientation to the future provide highly meaningful frameworks for people to build commonalities with others at work.

Language plays a major role in the communication of interculturality. Lack of proficiency in the dominant language of the workplace may hinder one's ability to develop relationships and enact professionalism. Issues of language proficiency are intertwined with ideologies about what languages are perceived as expected and valued in the workplace and in the society at large.

Competent communication of interculturality requires examining issues from different vantage points, attention to nuances and acceptance of human interaction as emergent. The intuitively appealing "step lists" offered in popular intercultural communication literature and trainings are misleading and counterproductive. They conceal the complexity of real-life interactions with an illusion of predictability. At worst, they may serve to maintain stereotypes that affect how people perceive, interact with, and justify their actions towards those they frame as "different."

Rather than emphasise differences, it is beneficial to acknowledge that the workplace context offers numerous resources for constructing similarity. Interpersonal communication at work is first and foremost interpersonal communication; it may only sometimes become intercultural.