

**INTERACTION CONTEXTS** Interaction contexts are the settings or situations within which social episodes occur. Contexts impose a “frame” or reference point around communication experiences by helping people determine what specific actions should mean, what behaviors are to be expected, and how to act appropriately and effectively in a particular interaction. For example, what you assume will happen in a legal proceeding is shaped by the expectations your culture has trained you to understand about the legal context.

### WRITING PROMPT

#### Your Interaction Scenes

Think about the social interaction scenes that you have at school, work, or with your friends and family members. Which topics characterize those social interaction scenes? Describe how these topics may shift depending on the context and the type of relational contacts involved.

▶ The response entered here will appear in the performance dashboard and can be viewed by your instructor.

Submit

## 11.2: Contexts for Intercultural Communication

*Contexts* are the everyday settings within which social episodes occur. When people meet and communicate, the context imposes a “frame of reference” upon the communicators by suggesting what behaviors are preferred, permitted, or prohibited. U.S. Americans are increasingly being asked to participate in social episodes within three specific contexts that we would like to highlight:

1. Health care
2. Education
3. Business

Each provides an important and recurring meeting ground where people from many cultures converge and interact. Consequently, these contexts pose key challenges for intercultural competence. We now describe in greater detail the particular importance and challenge of these three contexts.

✓ **By the end of this module, you will be able to:**

- 11.2.1: Summarize the challenges of intercultural communication in the context of health care
- 11.2.2: Summarize the challenges of intercultural communication in educational systems
- 11.2.3: Summarize the challenges of intercultural communication in the business world

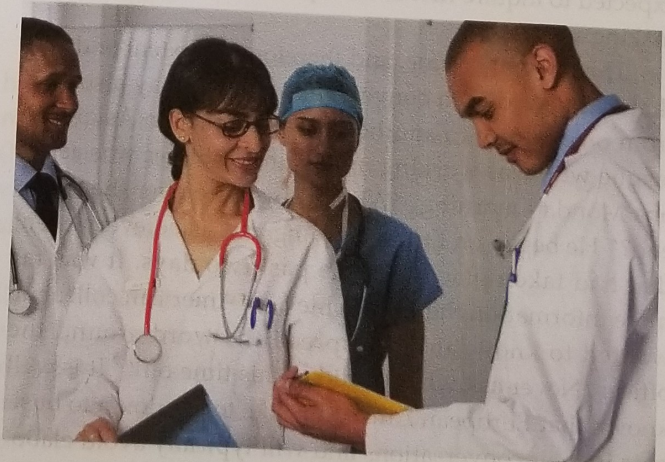
### 11.2.1: The Health Care Context

**OBJECTIVE:** Summarize the challenges of intercultural communication in the context of health care

The need for intercultural competence arises, in part, because of the increased cultural mixing that has occurred across national boundaries and within the United States itself. The health care context affects doctors, nurses, counselors, and health care workers as well as patients, families, communities, and cultural groups. Within the health care context, there are often multiple cultures represented among those who are the medical providers, others who work in the setting, and still others who benefit from the services provided.<sup>8</sup> The consequences to human life and suffering from a lack of intercultural competence in the health care context should be obvious.

Communication scholars have been studying the specific characteristics of the intercultural health care context in an effort to improve communication competence.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, health care professionals have responded to the intercultural imperative by including courses that are designed to increase intercultural communication skills within their professional training and development programs. In fact, health care professionals are increasingly educated and trained with the goal of improving their intercultural competence.<sup>10</sup> The elements of intercultural competence on which we focus—one’s knowledge, motivations, skills, and social practices—are repeatedly identified as essential to the health care professional seeking to provide the best health care.<sup>11</sup>

The nursing profession, for instance, has developed a specialization in “transcultural nursing” that has a well-established professional organization, the Transcultural Nursing Society. Similarly, the American Academy of Nursing has developed specific recommendations on the development of intercultural competence for the nursing profession.<sup>12</sup> Textbooks, training materials, and studies of



A multicultural medical team meets to discuss their patients’ needs.

the competence of students and faculty alike are now common within nursing education settings, and courses in transcultural nursing are standard offerings in many undergraduate and graduate nursing degree programs.<sup>13</sup>

Resource materials are now available to assist all health care providers as they interact with people representing a range of cultural backgrounds.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, as a prerequisite to their certification, many health care providers are asked to demonstrate their competence in interacting with diverse cultural groups.<sup>15</sup> This increased emphasis on intercultural competence extends to college health officials,<sup>16</sup> speech–language therapists,<sup>17</sup> chiropractors,<sup>18</sup> occupational therapists,<sup>19</sup> mental health professionals,<sup>20</sup> child psychiatric practitioners,<sup>21</sup> social workers,<sup>22</sup> and those who work with multicultural aged populations in residential locations.<sup>23</sup> Even the use of online health information by immigrants has been studied as a means to improve health care delivery in this intercultural world.<sup>24</sup>

### Three Approaches to Explain Illness and Wellness

Three general approaches characterize beliefs about health that cultures might adopt to explain issues of illness and wellness:<sup>27</sup> magico-religious or personalistic,<sup>28</sup> holistic or naturalistic,<sup>29</sup> and biomedical or Western.<sup>30</sup>

**CULTURE'S INFLUENCE ON THE HEALTH CARE CONTEXT** Cultural patterns provide the lenses through which people come to understand their world. All participants in the health care context—the providers, the patients, their families, and the larger social world—draw from their own cultural patterns and expectations about what constitutes appropriate and effective medical care. Cultural patterns often lead to clear expectations about the right and wrong ways to treat illnesses and help people—expectations that are not necessarily shared by those from other cultures.<sup>25</sup> Cultures high in power distance, for example, often have rigid role expectations that result in very brief patient consultations with their medical providers.<sup>26</sup>

While scholars have offered several ways to conceptualize the systematic relationship of cultural patterns to health care, there is a remarkable similarity among their presentations.

## Interactive

### Magico-Religious or Personalistic Approach

### Holistic or Naturalistic Approach

### Biomedical or Western Approach

In the **biomedical or Western approach**, people are thought to be controlled by biochemical forces. Consequently, objective, physical data are sought. Good health is achieved by knowing which biochemical reactions to set in motion. Disease occurs when a part of the body breaks down, resulting in illness or injury. Doctors and nurses provide treatments by fixing the biochemical problem affecting the “broken part,” thus making the body healthy again. This approach is closely linked to European American cultural patterns and has had a major influence on the development of the health care system in the United States. Indeed, the biomedical approach is so dominant within the United States that it is sometimes difficult for individuals—providers and patients alike—to act competently in and adapt themselves to alternative cultural patterns.

Often these approaches to health and health care will collide in an intercultural encounter. An example of the collision of the magico-religious approach with the Western approach occurred in a sixth-grade classroom when the teacher saw red marks on the neck and forehead of a Vietnamese student. The teacher suspected abuse, but the marks were caused by the student's parents, who had treated the student's cold by dipping a coin into oil and rubbing very hard until the coin turned the skin red. The parents believed that internal bad winds caused illness and, by bringing the winds to the surface, a person can be healed of colds and upper respiratory problems. People from many Asian cultures hold similar beliefs.

Such health care clashes, often due to differing cultural patterns, highlight the impact of cultural differences on health care practices. An emergency room nurse, for example, took a call from a teenager whose father cut himself with an electric hedge trimmer and was bleeding heavily. Following a typical emergency room triage protocol, the nurse asked what the family was doing to treat the wound and learned that this Iranian family was treating it with honey, which they believed had the power to heal. After the family arrived at the emergency room, the nurse was surprised to see that the wound had already begun to close, and the bleeding had stopped.<sup>31</sup>

### WRITING PROMPT

#### Culture, Health Care, and Me

Think about your own experiences with health care. Explain which cultural approach—magico-religious (personalistic), holistic (naturalistic), or biomedical (Western)—dominates in your culture and which cultural approach seems to differ the most from the dominant one. What might happen if those two cultural approaches collided (with a person from the health care institution representing one approach and the patient representing the other)?

The response entered here will appear in the performance dashboard and can be viewed by your instructor.

Submit

**FAMILY AND GENDER ROLES IN THE HEALTH CARE CONTEXT** The role of the individual patient, in contrast to the role of the family, is an important difference in the functioning of health care systems. The health care system in the United States typically focuses solely on the individual patient as the source of the medical problems in need of a cure. Yet many cultures in the United States are more collectivistic and group oriented, and this difference can be the basis for serious problems and misunderstandings. Cultures that value the community or the extended family, for instance, may influence people's willingness to keep important health care appointments. Native American women, for example, who often give priority to family

members' needs, have been known to forgo clinic appointments when someone from the extended family stops in to visit and ask for help.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, competent treatment for Latino patients may require the involvement and agreement of other family members, not just the patient.<sup>33</sup>

The responsibilities of family members in the health care context differ widely across cultures. Among the Amish communities in the United States, for example, the family includes a large, extended group, with adult members of the extended family having obligations and responsibilities to children other than their own biological ones. Hospital rules that give rights and responsibilities only to members of the immediate family pose challenges when an Amish child is hospitalized. The large number of people who expect to make lengthy visits to the child may prove difficult for the medical staff.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, when suggesting health care intervention strategies for Pacific Islanders and Hawaiians, experts recommend focusing on the entire family, rather than on just the identified patient, to be effective.<sup>35</sup> Family involvement is also essential in Saudi Arabian health care, where the Saudis' expectations about the communal nature of illness frequently lead to misunderstandings when non-Saudi nurses are used.<sup>36</sup>

In many cultures, health care providers are expected to talk about the nature of the illness and its prognosis with family members but not with the patient. It is the family members, not the patient, who are expected to make decisions about the nature of treatment.<sup>37</sup> Of course, intercultural difficulties may occur when the family's ideas about the appropriate course of treatment differ from those of the medical staff. A Latino teenager, for example, was hospitalized at an oncology unit. Problems occurred when his family took him home for a day but did not follow the medical rules for such visits. He ate forbidden foods, did not return to the hospital at the specified time, and generally did not follow other aspects of his treatment. The medical team was upset with the family because the patient suffered a setback. The parents, however, knew that their son had only a limited time to live and wanted him to be with his family and enjoy what little time he had.<sup>38</sup>

Many cultures have strong expectations about modesty, and expectations about bodily displays for women can make the medical examination itself a source of intercultural difficulties. In some cultures, for instance, role requirements governing appropriate behaviors for women do not permit undressing for an examination by male physicians or nurses. Somali, Hmong, and Latina women, for example, value modesty and have strong social taboos against showing too much of their bodies to others; disrobing for a medical examination by male practitioners may be embarrassing and difficult.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, many women are uncomfortable revealing personal information in the presence of sons and daughters who may accompany them to the medical appointment.

Cultural differences in the role requirements that restrict interaction between women and men may also require that the medical caregivers be sensitive to important differences in needs and expectations. For example, 10-year-old Ahmed was hospitalized with complications from an appendectomy, and his mother had planned to stay all night with him in his hospital room. She became distressed when Patrick, another boy, was brought into the room as a patient; Patrick's father also wanted to stay with his son, but the appropriate role behavior for Ahmed's mother precludes interactions with men outside of her family. Fortunately, the hospital staff was sensitive to the cultural issues; they recognized the importance of the problem and moved Ahmed to a private room.<sup>40</sup>

**CONVERSATIONAL STRUCTURES, LANGUAGE, AND NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION** Because of different interaction rules, the medical interview between caregiver and patient can be another source of intercultural communication problems. Latinos and Arabs, for example, may engage in extensive small talk before indicating their reasons for the medical visit. Interviews with Native Americans may be punctuated with extensive periods of silence. Medical interviewers may consider such small talk or silence as a "waste of time" rather than a vital component of the person's cultural pattern that affects his or her comfort level and willingness to proceed with the interview.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, direct and explicit discussions with many Asians and Asian Americans may pose serious threats to their face, and the use of indirection or other face-saving strategies may be preferred.<sup>42</sup>

In many cultures, doctors are perceived as authority figures with whom one must agree in the face-to-face medical interview. A patient may know that he or she will not be able to follow a proposed treatment plan but may be reluctant to respond to the doctor in a way that might appear to be a challenge to the doctor's authority.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, individuals from cultures that see health care workers as authority figures will be reluctant to initiate interaction and ask questions.<sup>44</sup> Patients from individualistic and low-context cultures, for instance, often feel that it is important to communicate verbally with their physicians, and they are therefore motivated to do so. Conversely, patients from collectivistic and high-context cultures may be much more apprehensive about participating as a patient in their medical care, and they may therefore avoid conversing with their physicians during medical interviews.<sup>45</sup> Latinos, for example, may not want to provide direct answers to questions posed by the health care provider.<sup>46</sup>

A major challenge arises when patients and medical care workers do not even speak the same language.<sup>47</sup> Large urban hospitals and health care offices reflect the increasing multilingual characteristics of the United States. Interpreters

often play a key role in allowing health care workers to communicate with patients.<sup>48</sup> Health care education programs offer nurses, doctors, and other health care professionals many pathways to improve their ability to interact with patients who primarily speak other languages.<sup>49</sup>

It is not just ambiguities in understanding and in translating the English language that challenge health care workers. The Spanish language, for example, which is used by several U.S. cultures, has many words and grammatical constructions that vary from one cultural group to another.<sup>50</sup> Such cases highlight problems of intercultural misunderstandings and the implications for "informed consent."

**NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION** Nonverbal communication can also pose unique challenges in the health care context. Eye contact, for example, can have a multitude of meanings. Consider an interaction between a European American health care professional and a Nigerian patient. To the European American, direct eye contact is expected; when not given, individuals are often regarded as untrustworthy and disrespectful. To the Nigerian, who comes from a large power distance culture, direct eye contact may be avoided to show respect. Similarly, the appropriate use of touch varies widely across cultures, and, therefore, health care professionals must adjust their use of touch to be appropriate to the cultures of their patients. For Haitians, touching during conversations would be expected.<sup>51</sup> European Americans will touch the head of a child as a sign of friendliness, yet for some Southeast Asians such a gesture would be understood as an insult, since the head is the locus of one's soul.<sup>52</sup> Similar difficulties in the health care setting can arise for other aspects of nonverbal communication. As you reflect on these differences, you will understand the importance of intercultural competence.



Because health care may require the display of and access to one's body in ways that are private and personal, cultural expectations about what behaviors are permitted or prohibited are particularly important in such settings.

## Examples of Ambiguities in Language

Ambiguities in the use of language can present additional difficulties in diagnosing and treating illnesses. Idiomatic language in the health care context can create misunderstandings. Let's understand it with the help of few examples.<sup>53</sup>

Interactive

Example 1

Example 2

Example 3

Example 4

A nurse indicated to a Chinese-born physician that a patient had “cold feet” about an upcoming surgery; the physician, seeking to rule out circulatory problems, ordered vascular tests.

The effective treatment of a patient's pain by the health care professional requires an ability to interpret the patient's nonverbal and verbal codes so that a culturally appropriate medical intervention can occur. In many cultures, for instance, individuals are taught to be more stoic and circumspect in verbally identifying the severity of their pain. In other cultures, there is an expectation that one will use emotional and dramatic terms to describe one's experience of pain.<sup>54</sup>

**INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN THE HEALTH CARE CONTEXT** Health care professionals must assume a special responsibility in ensuring that they understand their patients in order to treat them effectively. This responsibility requires a willingness to attempt to understand the cultural patterns—the beliefs, values, interaction norms, and social practices—of their patients. There are excellent reference books now available to health care

professionals in which the general characteristics of various cultures are presented. However, in the health care context, as in all others, you must remember that each individual may or may not share the preferences of her or his cultural group.

**WRITING PROMPT****Intercultural Urgencies in the Health Care Context**

In reflecting on today's health care context, identify and describe what you see as the most important intercultural challenges. Explain why you identified those challenges.

▶ The response entered here will appear in the performance dashboard and can be viewed by your instructor.

Submit

### 11.2.2: The Educational Context

**OBJECTIVE:** Summarize the challenges of intercultural communication in educational systems

The U.S. educational system—from pre-kindergarten to college and on through graduate or professional school—increasingly requires competent intercultural communication skills from all of its participants. Because of the culturally diverse student populations throughout the U.S. educational system, people must give increased attention to the factors that students, parents, teachers, administrators, other educational professionals, and ordinary citizens face when challenged to communicate in the educational context.<sup>55</sup> All participants in the educational context—teachers, students, parents, school administrators, and other staff—bring their cultures' beliefs, values, norms, and social practices with them. Differences in cultural backgrounds may produce developmental variations in children's cognitive, physical, and motor abilities, as well as in their language, social skills, and emotional maturity.<sup>56</sup>

**CULTURE'S INFLUENCE ON THE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT** Communication in a classroom, on the playground of an elementary school, or within a college residence hall is typically governed by a set of rules based on one cultural group. European or Western cultural orientations underpin many educational systems around the globe,<sup>57</sup> and educators the world over are responding to culturally diverse student populations.<sup>58</sup>

In the United States, the patterns associated with the European American culture pervade the educational system, and they set the expectations for teachers, administrators, and students about how to behave and how to learn effectively and appropriately.<sup>59</sup> Yet, for most teachers in U.S. schools, it is an everyday occurrence to have students who come from cultural backgrounds other than their own. The demographic profiles of students in U.S. schools routinely identify many who speak different languages at home and who come from a large range of cultures. As a student in high school, or now in college, we anticipate that you may have already experienced classrooms of people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Alternatively, you may be a parent interacting within your children's school system. Students in intercultural communication classes may be preparing to teach in elementary or high schools. Many current teachers, and certainly most future teachers, will work in a setting that demands the knowledge, motivations, and skills of a competent intercultural communicator. In the words of Janet Bennett and Riikka Salonen, the U.S. campus today is "culturally complicated."<sup>60</sup>

For many students, attending school can itself be an intercultural experience. Elvira, for example, is a junior Filipina American student who, on a daily basis, crosses

the cultural boundary from her Filipino home to her U.S. American high school. Although she attends regularly and receives high grades, she is concerned that the school experiences cut her off from her sister and friends. Sonia, similarly, is a Mexican American high school student who is popular with her Latina friends but consistently feels like an outsider at school. This makes it difficult for her to be academically and socially successful in the educational context.<sup>61</sup>

#### Culture Connections

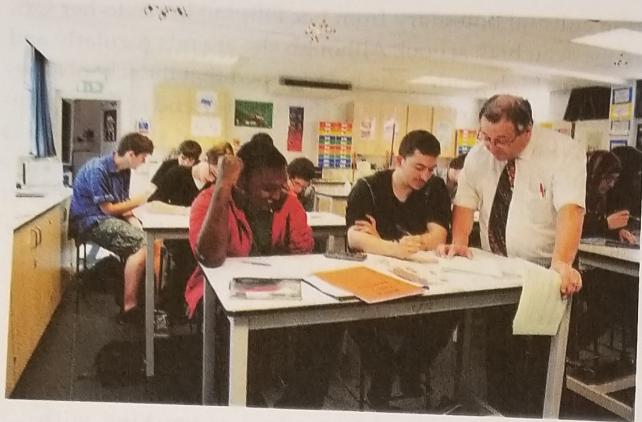
International student advisers working with students from Middle Eastern countries note several cultural differences that become problems on a U.S. college campus: a more leisurely sense of time, an assumption that grades and deadlines can be negotiated, and a preference for face-to-face or personal communication. A perfect example is the young Saudi student at the counter of a copy store in Arlington, Virginia. Upon picking up a report he had left to be bound, he noticed a duplicate page. The clerk offered to do it over while the young man waited. "No, I can't. The class has already started," he said, clutching his homework.

—Karen Legett

Scholars in communication and education have begun to document the many ways that cultural differences can lead to dissimilarities in interpretations and expectations about competent behaviors for students and teachers. Problematic issues include differences in expectations concerning such classroom behaviors as the rules for participation and turn taking, discipline and control, and even pedagogical approaches such as lectures, group learning, and self-paced work. Intercultural problems also arise when parents and other family members attempt to communicate with various officials representing the school.

**THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER** Cultures differ in the ways they choose to define activities, social relations, the self, the world, and the passage of time. All of these choices can influence preferences for how students and teachers relate to each other in the classroom.<sup>62</sup>

Teachers have a unique and powerful influence on student interactions in the classroom and beyond. Consequently, classroom teachers have a potent effect on how well students from different cultures learn. Teachers come to the classroom carrying with them both their unique personality characteristics and the influences of their culture, which often includes inaccurate judgments of some students based on cultural stereotypes.<sup>63</sup> Increasingly, scholars and practitioners in the United States and throughout the world are recognizing the unique



The intercultural nature of classrooms, from elementary school through college, requires educators to adapt their approaches to teaching and learning.

challenges of multicultural classrooms, and substantial attention is now being given to ways that teachers can be more effective and appropriate—that is, more competent—in their adaptations to the learning styles that characterize the range of their students' cultures.<sup>64</sup>

Teachers, then, have a particular responsibility to demonstrate intercultural communication competence. Often, the first step for teachers is to become more aware of cultural differences and then adapt when and how they approach their students. For example, an African American teacher of French, in what had been a predominantly European American East Coast suburban high school, described his experiences in teaching a changing, more multicultural student body:

When I first found myself teaching classes of mostly black kids, I went home frustrated every night because I knew I wasn't getting through to them, and they were giving me a hard time. It only started getting better when I finally figured out that I had to reexamine everything I was doing.<sup>65</sup>

This teacher began by being aware of cultural differences and then changing his approach to teaching.<sup>66</sup> Students training to become teachers in elementary and secondary schools in the United States now are routinely required to take courses to learn how to adapt their classroom teaching in ways that maximize learning for culturally diverse students.<sup>67</sup>

Those who prefer a more hierarchical relationship between individuals will structure the relationship between student and teacher with greater status differences. German instructors, for example, tend to be more formal, aloof, and socially distant than their U.S. counterparts.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, within many Asian and Asian American cultures, teachers are highly revered and respected. Students and parents would not openly and directly question the authority and statements of a teacher. Consider,

for example, the types of communication messages and the proper role behaviors of students and teachers in Chinese classrooms. If you are familiar with U.S. classrooms, compare your experiences with the following:

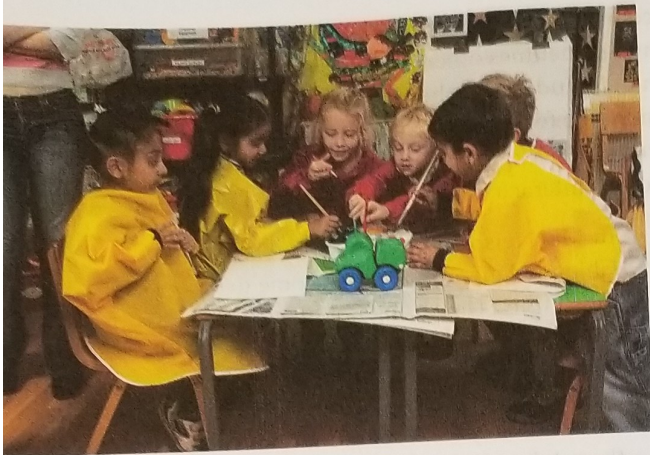
Students who are late for class should get the teacher's permission to enter the classroom. Even in college, students have to sit quietly in rows that face the teacher, listen attentively, and take careful notes. Students must also raise their hands and stand at attention when they answer or want to ask questions. Not raising a hand is a violation of classroom rules, and not standing up is a violation of the reverence rule.<sup>69</sup>

As this description conveys, the Chinese classroom is characterized by a high degree of formality. Many people from cultures with similar preferences for formality are shocked to find European American teachers' penchant for informality. Many U.S. professors, for instance, encourage students to call them by their first names; while many students prefer such informality, some feel uncomfortable because it suggests disrespect.

Even a teacher's seemingly inconsequential personal preference has the potential to create discomfort among students and their parents, often without the teacher even knowing about it. One such example is of a woman who was considered one of the best English teachers in her school but who used red ink to address her notes of encouragement to the students. For Koreans, particularly Buddhists, the teacher's "insignificant" preference to write the students' names in red ink created enormous distress, because a Buddhist only writes people's names in red at their death or at the anniversary of their death.<sup>70</sup>

**CLASSROOM INTERACTION** Cultural characteristics also influence what is appropriate and effective communication within the classroom. That is, culture shapes what is considered to be desirable and undesirable classroom behaviors. From the expectations for students interacting with their teachers, to the manner in which they relate with one another, to the language and topics considered appropriate for teachers and students to discuss, to the overall structure of interaction within a classroom—culture affects perceptions of competent classroom interaction.<sup>71</sup>

Students from collectivistic cultures are generally more accepting of messages about appropriate classroom behaviors and will comply with teachers' requests about classroom management.<sup>72</sup> Even the nature of teachers' persuasive messages differs across cultures. Chinese college teachers, for instance, appeal to the group in gaining student compliance, whereas European American teachers, with a cultural preference for individualism, stress the benefit to the specific student. Within the classroom, the treatment of personal property is also influenced by the culture of the students, with "personal" items such as toys, books, and clothing perceived differently in individualistic and collectivistic cultures.<sup>73</sup>



This typical preschool classroom depicts the intercultural character of many schools across the United States.

Another example of cultural consequences on the learning environment can be seen in the research of Steven T. Mortenson, who found that, while both Chinese and U.S. American students responded to academic failure in similar ways, the Chinese students were less likely to express their concerns about academic failure to others and instead were more likely to experience physical illnesses.<sup>74</sup>

**DISCUSSION AND PARTICIPATION** Classroom discussion and participation also vary greatly across cultures. Donal Carbaugh, who studies how culture is displayed in people's conversations, makes a comparison between European American expectations for classroom interaction and those of the Blackfeet, one of the Native American tribes in the United States (Table 11.1).<sup>75</sup>

It is easy to imagine a classroom with a European American teacher and students from both cultures; in a typical classroom with European American norms, the European American students would feel comfortable with their learning experience, whereas the Native American students would be hesitant to volunteer, speak out, or raise concerns unless the teacher specifically calls on them by name.<sup>76</sup>

**Table 11.1** Expectations for Classroom Interaction between European Americans and Blackfeet

European American	Blackfeet
Emphasize talking as the classroom's primary focal point	Are more comfortable when there is a deliberate emphasis on silence in the classroom
Value uniqueness and equality among all participants	Value the stability that comes from an emphasis on sustaining one's heritage
Regard "progress" as a fundamental goal of communication	Value social hierarchies based on gender and age, regarding "relational connections" as a fundamental goal of communication

Similarly, many Asian and Asian American students rarely ask the teacher directly for clarification; to do so might be regarded as a challenge to the teacher's authority and could threaten his or her face should the answer not be known. Korean students are often unwilling to talk with their teachers even when the teachers have incorrectly calculated the students' scores on an exam.<sup>77</sup> Like Native Americans and Korean Americans, Cambodian American students often display classroom behaviors that are consistent with their cultural backgrounds, rather than with the dominant European American expectations. The contrasting expectations for these behaviors are displayed in Table 11.2.<sup>78</sup>

**ADAPTING TO EXPECTATIONS** Students from many cultures who go to school in the United States may find it difficult to adapt to the verbal style expected of them. Conversely, when U.S. students study overseas, they often experience difficulties in understanding the cultural expectations related to the educational context.<sup>79</sup> Yet a willingness to speak in class is a communication characteristic highly valued by European American teachers and students, whose cultural framework celebrates individual achievement and responsibility. To students from cultures that emphasize the collective good and the maintenance of face, however, such behaviors in the classroom are too competitive, as they disrupt the group's harmony and

**Table 11.2** Contrasting Cultural Beliefs about Education

#### Cultural Beliefs of Cambodian Americans

Children should be interdependent and rely on the group's wisdom. They should accept their elders' wisdom without question, even if the specific reasons for what they are told are not understood completely.

Collectivism and group cohesiveness are most desirable. Until they become adults, students' personal views and unique qualities are not important; most desirable is conforming to the cultural norms for acceptable behaviors.

Children are naturally motivated to learn. Though curiosity is an inherent characteristic of all children, it needs to be suppressed to meet the expectations of the adult members of the culture.

Mistakes are not condoned or acceptable; students lose face when they make mistakes in classrooms or in other public settings.

Classrooms are sites of controlled learning, where students are encouraged to learn by listening and to conform to the tempo and organization of the learning environment that adults have developed.

#### Cultural Beliefs of European Americans

Children should be independent and self-reliant. Questioning and challenging the ideas of parents and teachers is encouraged as an important aspect of learning to think as an adult.

Individualism and individuality are most desirable. Students should be encouraged to develop a personal point of view and to express their uniqueness.

Children are naturally motivated to learn. Though curiosity is an inherent characteristic of all children, it needs to be nurtured and encouraged to blossom fully.

Learning includes making mistakes, which are an important part of the classroom learning experience.

Classrooms are sites of active learning, where students are encouraged to question the "truth" of ideas, to connect disparate viewpoints, and to verbalize their developing interpretations of the world.

separate people from one another.<sup>80</sup> Native American fifth and sixth graders, for example, perceived their high-verbal teachers to have less competence in their oral delivery of messages.<sup>81</sup> Similarly, African American children, whose culture emphasizes the development of verbal skills and expressiveness, are often affected in their classroom interactions with their European American teachers:

In both verbal and nonverbal language, they [African American children] are more theatrical, show greater emotion, and demonstrate faster responses and higher energy ... African-American speakers are more animated, more persuasive, and more active in the communication process. They often are perceived as confrontational because of this style. On the other hand, the school, and most Anglo-American teachers, are more oriented toward a passive style, which gives the impression that the communicator is somewhat detached, literal, and legalistic in use of the language. Most African-American students find this style distancing and dissuasive.<sup>82</sup>

Turn taking within the classroom is also governed by cultural expectations. Watch how teachers in your various classes regulate the flow of conversations and contributions. A teacher has a particular set of expectations about who speaks in the classroom as well as when and how to speak:

- Is it acceptable for students to talk among themselves?
- How loudly can they talk to each other?
- How long can private conversations continue before the teacher asks for them to stop?
- How do students get permission to speak in class?

All of these classroom behaviors, which are crucial to how teachers evaluate their students and how students evaluate teachers and classroom environments, are grounded in cultural expectations.

Cultural patterns directly affect preferred ways to learn in the classroom. Think for a moment about the classroom experiences you have had. Did they encourage students to work cooperatively in groups? Or were classroom activities designed to encourage students to work alone, succeeding or failing on their individual merits? Latino children, whose culture teaches the importance of family and group identities, are more likely to value cooperativeness than competitiveness.<sup>83</sup> Because Native American cultural patterns emphasize the group, harmony with nature, and circularity, children from that culture often respond better to learning approaches that are noncompetitive, holistic, and cooperative.<sup>84</sup> European American children, in contrast, often prefer learning approaches that emphasize competition, discrete categories for information, and individual achievement.

**FAMILIES AND THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM** Another key set of relationships in which competent intercultural

communication is essential is in the interaction of parents, and sometimes other family members, with school personnel, including teachers, administrators, and others. Consider the following examples of how parents from different cultural backgrounds with children in kindergarten classrooms interacted with their children and the classroom:

In Ms. Nelson's kindergarten classroom, some of the Chinese-American mothers come to school every day at lunch time. They bring hot lunches and hand-feed their five year old children. In another kindergarten classroom, Mexican American mothers walk their children to school. When the bell rings they enter the classrooms with their children. They walk the children to their tables and help them take off their jackets. They hang their children's jackets and book bags on the hooks, generally located in the back of the room, before leaving the classroom. When parent-teacher conferences were held in early October, a European-American mother proudly told her child's teacher that Elizabeth could tie her own shoes when she was four years old.<sup>85</sup>

The range of differences in parental involvement with their children at this grade level indicates the wide range of meanings and expectations that parents from different cultures can have of teachers in just one school and one classroom.

Teachers' evaluations of their students' classroom behaviors are also heavily influenced by cultural expectations. Judgments that Asian Americans are "too quiet" or that African Americans are "too animated" are anchored in teachers' cultural preferences. If teachers make such judgments, it will decrease their ability to work with parents to improve their students' overall learning.<sup>86</sup>

Because the value of education differs from one culture to another, the importance of a student's success in school will also vary. For Thais and Filipinos, for instance, education affects the entire family's status and social standing. By excelling in school, therefore, children bring honor to their families while preparing for future successes that will further enhance the family stature. Education is thus a family concern, rather than an individual achievement.<sup>87</sup>

Even the need for the customary parent-teacher conferences may not make much sense to parents from cultures in which there is no expectation that parents will play an active role in decisions about their children's education.<sup>88</sup> Many Middle Eastern parents, for instance, expect their children to do well in school. Thus, when the children actually do well, there is generally less overt praise or material reward than is common in the United States; the children are doing what is expected of them. However, when the children do not do well, parents may present a variety of attitudes, including denial, blaming the school, blaming the child, and feeling ashamed.<sup>89</sup>

Similar expectations exist among many Asian and Asian American parents. A teacher's request for a routine

conference, for example, may be met with a sense of skepticism or a deep concern that a disobedient child may have dishonored the family. Because of face-saving needs, the parents may even assume that the exact nature of this problem will not be stated explicitly but must be discerned through a clever analysis and interpretation of the teacher's subtle clues. The teacher's bland statements that their child behaves well are therefore regarded as merely a social politeness. Not wanting to heap unlimited praise on the child for fear of setting false expectations, the teacher may unwittingly provide the parents with just the sort of high-context hints and generalities about the child's faults and weaknesses that they will interpret as an indication of a deeper and more difficult problem in need of correction.

A poignant example of the consequences of differing cultural expectations, complicated by linguistic difficulties, is the story of Magdalena, a Mexican immigrant mother, and her son Fabian. Because Fabian was not behaving appropriately in school, the school officials asked Magdalena to have Fabian evaluated by a professional. Concerned about Fabian and wanting to be responsive to the school's request, Magdalena took Fabian to see their family doctor. As the situation at the school became more negative, the teachers and administrators believed that Magdalena was ignoring the seriousness of the problem and was not responding to their request. Ultimately, Fabian was expelled from school.<sup>90</sup> As Jerry McClelland and Chen Chen conclude,

The combination of the school's instructions, the interpreter's translation, and her comprehension of the message resulted in Magdalena not understanding that a counselor's report, rather than a physician's report, was being requested. Given the Mexican culture in which she grew up, Magdalena was puzzled by the message to have Fabian checked. Magdalena said that in Mexico, if there is a problem with a child, the teacher and parent talk to each other and do not bring in a third person to give an opinion.<sup>91</sup>

**INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN THE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT** The challenge to develop one's intercultural competence and fulfill the promise that cultural diversity brings to the educational context is aptly summarized by Josina Makau. She suggests that creating a constructive learning environment in an age of cultural diversity requires that people be sensitive to different and sometimes competing experiences.<sup>92</sup>

The intercultural challenges of communicating in a different language are also prominent within the educational context. Increasingly, schools in the United States are finding it advantageous to translate the letters that are sent home to parents so that immigrant parents are better able to learn about key school issues and events. Even then, the unique features of each language, the presence of colloquialisms, and the use of specialized terminology still present

barriers for parents whose primary language is not U.S. English.<sup>93</sup>

The starting point for developing intercultural competence in the educational context is to understand one's own cultural background. It is particularly important that teachers and administrators recognize their culture's influence on expectations about how classrooms should operate and how students should behave.<sup>94</sup> The stakes for developing intercultural competence in education are very high. Although the following example focuses on Native Americans, it is equally true of students from a variety of cultural backgrounds. It illustrates the importance of the educational context and the potential for both permanent and harmful consequences as a result of interactions within that context.

When many young Native American children enter the classroom, they frequently find themselves in foreign environments where familiar words, values, and lifestyles are absent. As the classroom activities and language become increasingly different from the familiar home environment, the students suffer a loss of self-confidence and self-esteem, a loss that is sometimes irreparable.<sup>95</sup>

### WRITING PROMPT

#### Today's Educational Context and Intercultural Communication

Reflect on today's educational context. Identify and describe the key intercultural issues and challenges of today's educational settings. How might these intercultural challenges shift depending on the school level (elementary, middle, high school, college, professional level)?

▶ The response entered here will appear in the performance dashboard and can be viewed by your instructor.

Submit

## 11.2.3: The Business Context

**OBJECTIVE:** Summarize the challenges of intercultural communication in the business world

Like the health care and educational contexts, the business context is now intercultural. From customers to employees to markets to financing and even to organizational structures, businesspeople now work in a world in which success requires intercultural competence.<sup>96</sup> Commerce and trade are global and affect us daily. Books, training programs, websites, and courses abound with information, advice, and skills necessary to navigate our global world with intercultural communication competence skills.<sup>97</sup> Just look at your possessions and you will see ample evidence of the products that have crossed national and cultural boundaries. People, however, are the key ingredients in the intercultural business world.



Work settings are increasingly culturally diverse, providing opportunities to improve intercultural competence.

Throughout most of your working life, you will likely be within an intercultural business context; some of your customers, coworkers, supervisors, and subordinates will come from cultures that differ from your own. Many organizations today include people who were born in one country, educated in another, and work in yet another. Many projects—by architects, engineers, businesspeople, medical personnel, financial managers, and others—are done in one country during their daytime and electronically transmitted across the globe for work during the daytime of another culture’s workforce. Intercultural communication in the business context is also increased by the availability of easy, fast, and inexpensive communication. As a recent analysis suggests, by the year 2020, “our office will be everywhere; our team members will live halfway around the world.”<sup>98</sup> Employees of multinational business organizations are now able to conduct their work using email, chat boards, and powerful videoconference capabilities that allow interaction over various Internet services. Similarly, travel to most of the major cities in the world can be done within a day or two; these technological innovations make communication quick and sometimes inexpensive, but they also can be potentially problematic because of intercultural differences.

Many businesspeople are inadequately prepared to take an intercultural assignment or to work in an intercultural team. The critical need to coach individuals to work in intercultural settings has spawned a large industry of professionals who provide training to companies and to

individuals who are about to have an intercultural assignment.<sup>99</sup> An Internet search for “intercultural training” or “intercultural preparation” will provide evidence of the prevalence of this instruction. Many corporations now hire training firms to improve the productivity of their operations with their intercultural workforce.<sup>100</sup>

### Culture Connections

Your attitude would seem strange to him. He’s Chinese, as you know, and there’s a cultural divide that isn’t easily explained. There’s also a gap between the way business is conducted in China and the way it’s conducted here. My client would just as soon shake your hand as sign a contract. The difference to him is negligible in terms of his expectation of being delivered what you promise. And if you fail to deliver, then he expects you to compensate him—without bringing lawyers into it.

—Jan Hamilton

**CULTURE’S INFLUENCE ON THE BUSINESS CONTEXT** Differences in cultural patterns create widely dissimilar expectations for how a business is structured and what is considered appropriate and effective—and therefore successful—communication within that business. Several taxonomies depict the dimensions of cultural patterns, which directly apply to business organizations around the world. While all of the dimensions are useful for understanding issues in the intercultural business context, our discussion will highlight differences in business practices that are related to the individualism–collectivism dimension.

Cultural variations in people’s relationships to their organizations are important in understanding the intercultural business context. Is the critical unit of analysis and of human action the individual or the group?

### WRITING PROMPT

#### The Role of Globalization

As more businesses grow across multiple nations and strive to become global brands, how do you think this globalization will affect the differences in the intercultural business context?

▶ The response entered here will appear in the performance dashboard and can be viewed by your instructor.

Submit

**THE UNIVERSALISM–PARTICULARISM DIMENSION** After many years of studying companies around the globe, scholar-practitioner Fons Trompenaars identified the **universalism–particularism dimension** as

### Individualism–Collectivism and the Business Context

Specific areas of intercultural business that are associated with variations in individualism–collectivism include the following criteria: the representative, the decision maker, the primary motivator,<sup>101</sup> and the basis for business relationships.<sup>102</sup>

#### Interactive

#### Who Speaks for the Organization?

In organizations within individualistic cultures, a single person may represent a company in its negotiations. In collectivistic cultures, a group of representatives would likely be involved in negotiations.

#### Who Decides for the Organization?

#### What Motivates People to Work?

#### What Is the Basis for Business Relationships?

especially useful in understanding how business practices vary because of culture. **Universalistic cultures** prefer to make business decisions based on a consistent application of rules, whereas **particularistic cultures** choose instead to adapt the rules to specific circumstances and relationships. William B. Gudykunst and Yuko Matsumoto indicate that universalism–particularism is related to the individualism–collectivism dimension. They suggest that businesspeople from individualistic cultures tend to be universalistic and apply the same value standards to all, whereas those from collectivistic cultures tend to be particularistic and apply different value standards to ingroups and outgroups.<sup>103</sup>

Just as in the educational and health care contexts, every element of the business context can be influenced by culture. Though we separate these element for ease of

discussion, we do want to remind you that, in actual communication in the business context, their impact on culture forms an interconnected whole that cannot be understood as a set of unrelated parts.

**BUSINESS NEGOTIATION AND DEAL MAKING** In the business context, the core activity of much intercultural communication involves negotiations to make a business deal. These interactions range from large multinational corporations that are discussing multibillion-dollar contracts, to the small business owners who want something manufactured in another country, to salespeople who are selling products to people who are culturally different from themselves. This intercultural challenge is summed up by an international negotiations expert, who suggests that one's typical approach to business discussions "may

### Universalism–Particularism and the Business Context

Some features of the impact of this variation on the conduct of international business include the following considerations.<sup>104</sup>

#### Interactive

#### What Is the Meaning of a Contract?

Someone from a universalistic culture may view the signed contract as binding on all, whereas someone from a particularistic culture may view the contract as valid only if the circumstances remain unchanged, which may include whether the person who signed the contract is still part of his or her company. For example, the Chinese concept of legal or contractual agreements differs from the U.S. concept. In the United States, a business contract is binding and should be implemented precisely as agreed. In China, however, contracts are sometimes regarded more as statements of intent rather than as promises of performance. Therefore, they are binding only if the circumstances and conditions that were in effect when the contract was signed are still present when the contract should be implemented.

#### Are Job Evaluations Conducted Uniformly or Adapted to Specific Individuals?

#### Are Corporate Office Directives Typically Heeded or Circumvented?

work perfectly when you're doing a deal with a company in your own country. But in today's globalized economy you could be negotiating a joint venture in China, an outsourcing agreement in India, or a supplier contract in Sweden ... What gets you to 'yes' in one culture gets you to 'no' in another."<sup>105</sup>

Cultures differ in the preferred flow or pacing of business negotiations.<sup>106</sup> In the initial stages of a negotiation, for example, German business managers may ask numerous questions about technical details. In Scandinavia, there is a great deal of initial frankness and a desire to get right down to business. Among the French, however, the early emphasis is on laying out all aspects of the potential deal. In contrast, many Italian and Asian managers may use these same initial stages to get to know the other person by talking about subjects other than the business deal. Likewise, preliminaries in Spain may take several days.<sup>107</sup> Similarly,

problems often characterize Mexican and U.S. American negotiations, which arise from a greater emphasis on relational concerns by Mexican negotiators and on task behaviors by U.S. negotiators.<sup>108</sup> Many Africans also want a friendship to be established before doing business.<sup>109</sup>

In the United States and in other Western countries, where individual achievement is valued, advancements occur because of one's accomplishments, there is a shorter-term and results-oriented approach to negotiating, and a high priority is placed on getting the job done and accomplishing task-related objectives. Interpersonal communication is typically direct, confrontational, face to face, and informal. Negotiating teams are willing to make decisions and concessions in the public negotiation setting, where individuals within the team may disagree publicly with one another. One individual is usually given the authority to make decisions that are binding on all.<sup>110</sup>

Russians, though, prefer a negotiation style that is more indirect and that may not address issues straightforwardly. To Russians, U.S. Americans often appear too confrontational and aggressive.<sup>111</sup> Among the Japanese, however, who value group loyalty and age, advancement is based on seniority, there is a long-term approach to negotiating, and the formation and nurturance of long-lasting business relationships are extremely important. Interpersonal communication is likely to be indirect, conciliatory in tone, and formal. Often an intermediary is used, the real decision making occurs privately and away from the actual negotiations, the negotiating teams make group decisions, and all team members are expected to present a united front.

Such differences may lead to difficulties and to failure for the unwary. Consider the attempts of a U.S. businessman trying to negotiate an important deal in India:

Joel, in his frustration, tried to speed up matters, as a lot more issues had to be addressed, but the Indians felt that he was only interested in finalizing and implementing the deal. They also began to question his intelligence, abilities, and sincerity. His informal way of addressing them also made them [feel] uncomfortable and not respected. All in all, they didn't really trust him or the deal he was proposing.<sup>112</sup>

Table 11.3 provides additional examples of some of the key differences in ways of thinking and in expectations for business negotiations across five cultures.

Even when negotiations have been successful, cultural variations in common social practices can cause problems. Consider the experience of Richard, who works for a U.S. company that ships refrigerated containers to Asia. Richard's company uses a yellow marker to indicate that the product has passed inspection. This makes Chinese customers suspicious of the quality of the products, since Chinese manufacturers use yellow to signify a defective product.<sup>113</sup>

Intercultural competence is required for successful business transactions within the intercultural United States. Consider the circumstances of Ms. Youngson, the head of a corporate sales division, who sent her sales representatives to the Chinese and Korean merchants in her city. She had a competent sales crew, she thought, but they were remarkably unsuccessful. Finally, out of desperation, she sent her team to a training workshop designed to help them understand the needs of Asian customers. The team discovered numerous cultural errors in their sales approach, including the most grievous error of focusing on the business of the sale too quickly, rather than going through steps to establish a trusting relationship. The sales representatives also learned not to sit unless they were invited to do so, and they were trained not to put their materials on the desk or even to lean on it.<sup>114</sup>

**INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND FACE MAINTENANCE IN BUSINESS NEGOTIATIONS** Cultural differences in business practices are also evident in the use

**Table 11.3** Business Negotiation in Five Countries

Dimension	Finland	India	Mexico	Turkey	United States
Goal: contract or relationship		Business is personal; establish relationships	Seek long-term relationships	Establish relationships before negotiating	Establish rapport quickly, then move to negotiating
Attitude: win-lose or win-win			Have a win-win attitude		Look for mutual gains, whenever possible
Personal style: informal or formal		Negotiations follow formal procedures, but the atmosphere is friendly and relaxed	Established etiquette must be followed		Do not use formality or rituals in business interactions
Communication: direct or indirect	Direct	"No" is harsh; evasive refusals are common, and more polite	Negotiators may seem indirect and avoid saying "no"	Politeness is important	Be direct and to the point
Time sensitivity: high or low	Begin business right away, without small talk; it is not appropriate to be late	Conduct business at a leisurely pace; "time-is-money" is an alien concept	The business atmosphere is easygoing	Do not expect to get right down to business; the pace of meetings and negotiations is slow	Expect quick decisions and solutions
Emotionalism: high or low	Use objective facts, rather than subjective feelings; serious and reserved	Facts are less persuasive than feelings	Truth is based on feelings; emotional arguments are more effective than logic	Show emotion; feelings carry more weight than objective facts	Subjective feelings are not considered "facts"; points are made by accumulating facts
Team organization: one leader or consensus	Individuals are responsible for decisions	Decisions will be made at the top	Authority is vested in a few at the top; seek consensus		Individuals with relevant knowledge and skills make decisions
Risk taking: high or low		Take risks	Avoid risk	Take risks	

of interpersonal relationships for strategic purposes. In Colombia and other Latin American countries, for example, achieving objectives by using interpersonal connections to obtain jobs, contracts, supplies, and other contacts—that is, giving and receiving personal favors to create an interdependent network of relationships—is regarded very positively.<sup>115</sup> Similar customs exist in India and elsewhere. While not as widespread throughout the multicultural U.S. workplace, such practices as providing emotional support to fellow workers, and thereby building informal social networks that can be used strategically to circumvent the bureaucracy, are common.<sup>116</sup>

The importance and value of social hierarchy and face maintenance are illustrated by many Chinese businesses. Chinese businesspeople will likely have to check with their superiors before making any real decisions. In Chinese organizations, superiors are expected to participate in many decisions that U.S. managers might routinely delegate to subordinates. The Chinese process of consulting the next higher level in the hierarchy often continues up the bureaucratic ladder to the very top of the organization. Thus, the autonomy that is expected and rewarded in the United States may be regarded as insubordination in China.<sup>117</sup> Likewise, while decisions to approve or reject specific requests or proposals may be communicated clearly by Chinese managers, justifications for such decisions are often vague or omitted in an effort to protect the face of the employees. In a business negotiation involving Chinese and U.S. Americans, therefore, attempts by the U.S. team to insist on explanations for Chinese decisions may communicate a lack of respect and a failure to acknowledge the Chinese attempts at face maintenance.

**CONVERSATIONAL STRUCTURE, LANGUAGE, AND NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION** We began this chapter by describing the many social episodes that form much of the social interaction of our lives. The business context has many social episodes enacted with rules derived from various aspects of culture. Something seemingly as simple as the exchange of business cards can set the tone for subsequent business relationships. Many U.S. businesspeople simply take the business cards offered to them and, after a perfunctory glance, tuck them away; in most Asian cultures, however, the exchange of business cards requires a more involved ritual in which the cards are examined carefully upon their receipt.

**CONVERSATIONAL STRUCTURE** The ease of international telecommunications brings businesspeople from around the globe into interactions using the common communication episode of “making an introductory telephone call.” Yet something as straightforward as the protocol for a common telephone call is shaped by the many differences that one’s culture creates. Variations in the purposes of telephone calls, their degree of formality, the expectations

about appropriate opening and closing remarks, and the anticipated length of the conversation all present intricate choices for achieving intercultural communication competence.<sup>118</sup> In India, for example, call center workers have had to receive extensive intercultural training to deal with irate U.S. callers. The U.S. Americans

often wanted a better deal or an impossibly swift resolution, and were aggressive and sometimes abrasive about saying so. The Indians responded according to their deepest natures: They were silent when they didn’t understand, and they often committed to more than they could deliver. They would tell the Americans that someone would get back to them tomorrow to check on their problems, and no one would.<sup>119</sup>

As part of their training, the Indian workers watched *Friends* and *Ally McBeal* to get an initial grounding in U.S. interaction patterns. Then they were taught how to begin conversations, how to end them, how to express empathy, and—however unnatural it might feel—how to be assertive. Many books and Internet resources are now available to help people navigate a world in which intercultural business contacts are increasing because of modern communication technologies such as smartphones, social media, texting, chat apps, emails, telephone conversations, and, of course, the Internet itself. These resources provide specific tips on conducting business in the intercultural context.<sup>120</sup>

**LANGUAGE** How language is used in business contexts is also highly influenced by culture. There is, for example, much more formality used by French-speaking Canadians than by English-speaking Canadians.<sup>121</sup> Mexican businesspeople are likely to use persuasive arguments that, from the perspective of many U.S. Americans, may seem “overly dramatic.”<sup>122</sup> Differences in role expectations and in the rules for interactions between Japanese and U.S. American businesspeople are not confined to meetings that take place in Japan, nor are they limited to negotiations among teams from different organizations. Young Yun Kim and Sheryl Paulk found that communication problems and misunderstandings occurred within a Japanese-owned company in the United States because of the Japanese preference for indirectness and the U.S. American preference for directness.<sup>123</sup> Indonesians similarly prefer a high level of indirectness in business contexts.<sup>124</sup>

Cultural differences also influence whether subordinates are direct or indirect when verbally telling their bosses that they can’t or won’t do something that was requested of them. In Hong Kong, for example, direct refusals rarely occur in face-to-face encounters, but the medium of email sometimes allows them.<sup>125</sup> Even the ubiquitous and essential webpages that businesses routinely create reflect underlying cultural patterns; in low-context cultures, for instance, organizational websites tend to have messages that are direct, explicit, and linear, which

makes them easier to understand in the absence of contextual clues. In high-context cultures, the use of indirection is much more common.<sup>126</sup>

**NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION** Specific aspects of differences in nonverbal communication also pose challenges in the business context. The United States, England, China, France, Japan, and Germany all operate with an expectation of punctuality. In Germany, being even two or three minutes late is considered insulting.<sup>127</sup> Nonverbal behaviors such as smiling, head nodding, and silence also differ across cultures, and competent business practices require an understanding of these distinctions. As Roong Sriussadaporn describes,

When an expatriate supervisor assigned a task to a Thai local employee, the Thai employee smiled, nodded his head, and said nothing. The expatriate supervisor thought that his assignment would be accomplished by his Thai subordinate without any problem while his Thai subordinate had made no commitment. In fact, he only acknowledged that he would try his best and keep working with no deadline unless he was clearly notified. . . . Culturally speaking, Thais usually do not refuse someone immediately when they are asked to do something. Thai employees rarely voice refusal to work, especially with their supervisors, even though they feel unwilling, unable, or unavailable.<sup>128</sup>

Touching, conversational distances, eye contact, and the use of silence also vary in their appropriate use. In India, men routinely hold hands as a sign of friendship and not of sexual interest; this challenges U.S. American and European managers, who interpret the nonverbal behavior quite differently.<sup>129</sup> Eye contact with Saudi Arabians can also become problematic for those from the United States or from some European cultures, because the Saudis do not engage in direct eye contact but rather sit much closer to those with whom they are interacting.<sup>130</sup> In Finland, silence is meant to encourage a person to keep talking, while Japanese negotiators employ silence as a tactic to maintain their control in the negotiation.<sup>131</sup>

### Culture Connections

In Brazil, coworkers often greeted one another with a hug or a kiss on the cheek. This was out of the comfort zone of many North American or Asian colleagues. Diversity as an ideal is different from the kinds of issues and tensions that might arise from a diverse work environment in actual practice, and he has learned that you need to ask, not assume, that you know what *different* means. You can't have one uniform set of materials on diversity that works everywhere.

—Cathy N. Davidson

Even the seating arrangements and protocol during many business negotiations are highly prescribed. Among the Japanese, tables are never round in such business settings, and the expression “head of the table” is meaningless. Contrary to the usual practice in the United States, the power seat is not necessarily occupied by the most senior person present. Rather, whoever is most knowledgeable about the specific discussion topic takes the power seat and is designated as the company’s official spokesperson for this aspect of the negotiations. At the conclusion of the business meeting, ritualistic thank-yous are uttered while all are still seated, both sides arise simultaneously and begin bowing, and the power person from the host company is expected to stay with the “guests” until they are outside the premises and are able to depart.<sup>132</sup>

**INTERCULTURAL TEAMS** The reality of the workforce and how business is conducted globally in today’s world means that many individuals now work in intercultural teams. This puts a premium on those individuals who have the knowledge, motivation, and skills to become interculturally competent. There are a spate of “how to” books and articles for these prospective team members,<sup>133</sup> along with simulations intended to improve the team’s intercultural competence.<sup>134</sup> Similarly, university business curricula now routinely include courses and experiences that provide the knowledge and skills that their students will need to work appropriately and effectively in multicultural teams.<sup>135</sup>

Sometimes the intercultural teams are within one business organization and located within one office or geographic space, while at other times the members of the work teams are spread across the globe in different countries and different time zones. One of the challenges for intercultural communication in today’s business context is developing intercultural competence in multicultural teams.<sup>136</sup> Consider managing differences seemingly as small as preferences for email versus chat and discussion boards within intercultural teams; for example, U.S. businesses tend to prefer email, while German businesses prefer discussion boards.<sup>137</sup>

Intercultural teams must accomplish their tasks and their work objectives, at times despite the lack of a common language with which to communicate. A recent study of intercultural teams within European organizations documents the importance of intercultural competence in language use. The findings suggest that team members often switch from one language to another in their attempts to be understood, that they pay extra attention to clarifying their ideas and explaining their thoughts as a means of reducing linguistic misunderstandings, and that English was the language most often used by these intercultural teams.<sup>138</sup>



Conducting business within an intercultural team can be both challenging and rewarding.

While intercultural teams have the potential to benefit from cultural differences as resources for problem solving, these teams do not always do so. Sometimes, in fact, cultural differences, and the judgments people make about others because of them, contribute to a hostile work environment.<sup>139</sup> Corinne Rosenberg describes “culturally challenged” work teams of a U.S. multinational corporation located in Europe that serviced a geographic area that included parts of Africa and the Middle East and reported to supervisors and colleagues in the United States. These work teams were replete with cultural misunderstandings and ineffective intercultural communication. Managers of these teams involved in email exchanges and conference calls ignored the reality of time zone differences. Cultural differences in communication style also contributed to the teams’ ineffectiveness. British members, whose style was less direct and more reticent, felt undervalued. To adjust to the multicultural team environment, these British team members had to learn to adapt their communication style without feeling that they had given up their own cultural mannerisms.<sup>140</sup> For intercultural teams, group meetings are frequently the forum for team members to interact with one another. Yet these meetings themselves often reflect differences in cultural orientations. For example, an analysis of German–U.S. intercultural teams found that the U.S. Americans tended to focus more on solutions to problems, whereas their German counterparts emphasized problem analysis.<sup>141</sup>

Work roles also differ across cultures. Among the Japanese, work roles are an extension of the family hierarchy:

[P]residents are “family heads,” executives “wise uncles,” managers “hard-working big brothers,” workers “obedient and loyal children.” American workers employed in Japanese-managed companies do not see themselves as

“loyal and obedient children” and instead hold traditional American values of individualism, competitiveness, and social mobility.<sup>142</sup>

Another area in which cultural differences affect the business context is in gender expectations. Cultures differ in their prescriptive roles for men and women; in many cultures women are unlikely to have managerial or supervisory positions in business. Women from the United States may have to make careful adjustments to be intercultural competent in the business setting.<sup>143</sup>

**INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN THE BUSINESS CONTEXT** What kinds of knowledge, motivations, and skills constitute “competence” in the business context? The very nature of competence itself may differ across cultures. That is, cultures often hold fundamentally different expectations about how competence ought to be displayed. Compare, for example, organizations with which you are familiar to the typical Thai organization. In Thai companies, people are perceived as communicatively competent only if they know how to avoid conflict with others, can control their emotional displays (both positive and negative), can use polite forms of address when talking to others, and can demonstrate respect, tactfulness, and modesty in their behaviors.<sup>144</sup>

As the workforce has become more culturally diverse, scholars and practitioners have tried to provide managers and their employees with the tools to work together successfully. Many managers now receive ongoing training about diversity issues, and company employees are often given similar opportunities to improve their knowledge, motivation, and skills.<sup>145</sup> Most people recognize that the cultural heterogeneity of the workforce brings with it special challenges and opportunities, both for companies and for the individuals who work in them.<sup>146</sup> Work teams that are culturally diverse, for example, are often more innovative and creative than are culturally homogeneous work groups,<sup>147</sup> but only if the team can use its differences to its advantage.<sup>148</sup> Percy W. Thomas bluntly summarizes the challenge to us all:

Twenty years of studying, teaching, and seeking to understand human reactions to differences of all sorts has led me to three conclusions:

1. People lack the communication skills, sensitivity, understanding, flexibility, and trust necessary to establish effective relationships;
2. many reactions to people who are culturally, racially, ethnically, and sexually different are based on irrational fears and nonsensical stereotypes; and
3. people do not know how to deal with their irrational fears, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors as they relate to inappropriate and counterproductive responses to diversity.<sup>149</sup>

**Cultural Differences in Performance Appraisals**

Expectations about the "proper" way to conduct employee performance appraisals and provide a rationale for judgments and actions are another source of cultural differences.<sup>150</sup>

Interactive

China

**United States**

**Saudi Arabia**

**Japan**

Chinese managers do not provide their subordinates with the detailed performance appraisals that are customary in many U.S. firms. Feedback on failures and mistakes is often withheld, which allows subordinates to save face and maintain their sense of esteem for future tasks within the organization. Similarly, what constitutes competent performance appraisals is culturally anchored.

The stakes for businesses are very high. Companies can lose the valuable talent of good employees when cultural differences affect their work negatively. Employees themselves experience their work environments in such a way as to affect their own mental well-being.

Charles R. Bantz summarizes the lessons he learned from working in a multicultural research team that was engaged in a long-term project spanning several years and several continents. Bantz recommends that increased attention and effort in four key areas would be most useful: gathering information about the multiple perspectives that will inevitably be present; maintaining flexibility and a willingness to adapt to differing situations, issues, and needs; building social relationships as well as task cohesion; and clearly identifying and emphasizing mutual long-term goals.<sup>151</sup>

**WRITING PROMPT**

**Intercultural Challenges in the Global Business Context**

Reflect on the extent to which the intercultural challenges have increased as business contexts continue to become more multinational. Identify and discuss the key intercultural challenges in today's business context. How do today's intercultural challenges compare to those that may have existed a few years ago? To what extent are the challenges different?

▶ The response entered here will appear in the performance dashboard and can be viewed by your instructor.

Submit