

Tips and Strategies: Building Cross-Cultural Bridges (Part 1)

(As a part of our effort to prepare College of Engineering undergraduates for their entry into an international community of practice, the staff of CTC plans to string together brief yet (we hope) insightful essays designed to help native and non-native speakers of English find common ground as literate technologists.)

While your international classmates may speak perfect formal English, their grasp of idiomatic English often lags behind yours. Some American expressions, such as “get out of here!” or “no way!” can lead to misunderstandings and hurt feelings. International students are influenced by perhaps a different religion, by the perspective of a different culture and upbringing, and linguistic assumptions based on a fluency in a first language. In short, cross-cultural interactions are often quite confusing.

In general, do you think that Americans are extroverts? Hollywood movies are among America’s major exports. We appear glamorous, wealthy, and up-front. But being extroverted or moneyed is not a universal cultural trait, here or overseas. For visitors to America, our habit of bragging appears to be immodest at best and impolite at worst. From their perspective, Americans exude a characteristic youthful irreverence and a lack of deference to authority figures. Our casual behavior, seen in the way we dress and our use of informal language, is not a universal trait. Many international students can be taken aback when they see this displayed openly in America.

When Americans talk, we show our sincerity by looking the other person straight in the eyes. If our partner cannot do the same, we suspect his integrity and honesty. A downward-cast demeanor is also interpreted as shy or sad. Those from more traditional cultures have been taught that staring is impolite. They are unused to and uncomfortable with the direct approach of Americans, preferring to count on their learned social skills.

The differences between cultures are often so subtle that they fly below our internal radar screens. Take numbers, for instance. Verbally, we start with a closed fist and raise fingers as we count; in Asia, it is just the opposite. Fingers gradually close toward the palm of the hand. In contrast, in Nepal, each joint of a finger signifies a number. There, three raised fingers mean nine, not three. Symbols for spans of time also vary from culture to culture. In both the Japanese and Chinese languages, for example, the ideograms for moon stand for a period of one month. In Japanese, specific ideograms express the days of the week: Monday is moon day; Tuesday is fire day; Wednesday is water day; Thursday is wood day; Friday is metal day (specifically, gold); Saturday is earth day; Sunday is sun day. Modern Chinese language is much more direct: Monday is the first day ... all the way to Sunday, the seventh day of the week.

Just as these languages have their own way of counting time, they have their own font system for reaching the Internet, which in Asiatic languages is an eight-bit universe. For us who use only 26 letters, ours is a mere seven-bit coding. The extra bit makes a world of difference in the way the

Internet and the Web can be accessed. Since other languages have more technical challenges, there has been a movement afoot for many years to standardize the Internet on something called *Unicode*, of which English is a subset.

As a result, English may not long remain the dominant language on the Internet or the Web. However, today's electronic media still has a strong English bias. Others feel it; we aren't aware of it. In the words of a Russian Internet provider, English is "an act of intellectual imperialism" (in Deborah Andrews, *Technical Communication in Global Communities*, p. 3.)

Because it is possible for American students to view the world solely from their own English-speaking perspective, a vast array of ideas, of perceptions of reality, and of communication modes are closed to them. It stands to reason, then, that befriending international students in your courses is one sure way to enrich your own college experience.

In a future article, we'll discuss the mystifying and often hilarious use of idioms. Here are some potentially baffling ones for visiting students:

Back burner, facing [something], get into (___), go-to man, how do you do, it's a challenge, living in a city/living on a street, make connections, offer false hope, on the A list, on the table, on whose word, over the hump, up front, very much into (___), what are your issues...