Coding and Decoding: Cultural Communication and Its Impact on Teacher/Student Relations

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This paper will discuss the ties between culturally relevant pedagogy and communication theory. First, this paper will establish that communication is a basic human behavior, essential to the function of society, and to the process of formal education. Second, this paper will draw a connection between communication and the act of teaching. Third, this paper will examine literature that theorizes how teacher beliefs impact their behavior, particularly in regards to their communication style and their ability to utilize culturally relevant pedagogy. Finally, this paper will discuss the need for teacher training in the areas of cultural communication.

Keywords: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Communication Theory, Coding, Decoding

The communication of information is a basic human necessity (DeVito, 2008). We communicate to share information; we communicate to express our feelings; we communicate to warn others of danger. Every single example of human interaction requires the communication of information in some form, whether verbally or non-verbally, and the ability of both parties to code and decode this information in ways that will impact their behavior moving forward (DeVito, 2008). In other words, we share information for the purpose of growth and learning; we share information to educate. This forms the foundation for the essential definition of communication: the sharing of information between parties to bring both

to a common state of knowledge and understanding, in an effort to affect behavior and achieve goals (Kocabas, 2009).

This paper asserts the notion that the profession of teaching can be broken down into a simple model of communication. The teacher possesses information (knowledge), he or she shares this information with the student (curriculum), and the student must demonstrate that they have received, understood, and internalized this information (assessment). However, there are so many situations when things get *lost in translation*, and students don't receive the information as they should. When this occurs, it signifies that there was a breakdown somewhere in the path of travel the information was disseminated through between sender and recipient. Perhaps the information was not coded correctly at its point of origin, or perhaps the problem was in the decoding of the information on the recipient's end. Either way, if the information cannot complete its journey from sender to recipient, the basic model of communication breaks down, the information cannot be shared, and both parties cannot reach a state of common knowledge and understanding. In the classroom, this breakdown of communication results in the student's inability to *learn*, impacting the student's overall performance.

This paper will posit that one reason for communication breakdown that may be most prevalent in urban education settings is the impact that culture has on communication, both in the sharing of, and the receiving of, information. The larger literature suggests that culture plays a pivotal role in the education of minority youth (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culture impacts how students receive information from teachers, and it also impacts how teachers present information. Certain life experiences and beliefs impact how both teacher and student alike communicate with one another, and both speak to the likelihood of reaching a common state of

knowledge and understanding. This paper will examine the relationship between culture, communication, and pedagogy. It will examine theories that explore how individual culture impacts the coding and decoding of information in a classroom setting. Furthermore, this paper will explore the need for culturally relevant pedagogy, it's impact on student performance, and how specific cultural communication training for teachers can improve the performance of minority students.

Literature Review

Communication Theory (Coding and Decoding) and Cultural Communication

The Shannon/Weaver model of Communication suggests that all communication can be broken down to its simplest form: getting information from point A (the sender) to point B (the recipient), with the intent of ensuring that both the sender and recipient achieve a state of common knowledge (Shannon & Weaver, 1964). The information being sent between sender and recipient is called *the message*, and the Shannon/Weaver model states that this message must travel along a path between the sender and recipient. The path of travel for a message can take many forms: a) it can be through verbal communication, where the message is spoken out loud; b) non-verbal, where the material is presented in print; or c) through kinesics, communication through movement and body language (Shannon & Weaver, 1964). However, before the message can begin its journey along its path of travel between parties, it must first be coded into a common language.

The concept of coding can best be described through the example of spoken language. If the sender of information speaks English, and the recipient speaks Spanish, and the message is coded in English, there is an almost certainty that the recipient will not understand the message,

and the attempt at successful sharing of information between the two will fail. This example of the *language barrier* suggests that culture, in this case, the spoken language of each party, can impact the basic model of communication in such a way as to hinder the sharing of information. This is due, in part, to the fact that, individuals are more likely to code information in a manner that they are familiar with (DeVito, 2008). Furthermore, their preferred method of information coding will be based upon their own life experiences, beliefs, worldviews and perspectives on reality. In the example of the *language barrier*, the sender is more likely to code information in their native tongue, because their primary language is their *reality*. This is the notion of linguistic relativity, or the notion that "a human being's language influences the manner in which he understands reality and behaves with respect to it" (Zhifang, 2002, p.162).

Of equal importance to the concept of information coding is the reciprocal notion of information *de*coding. If coding information were to be described as packaging information into a box for *shipping*, decoding would be unpacking the box once it has reached its destination. DeVito (2008) suggests that every recipient of information is surrounded by a cultural barrier, created over a lifetime of experiences, and based upon that individual's perception of the world around them. Any information an individual receives will be filtered through this barrier, and the relevance of the information will be determined before the individual can *unpack* it. Essentially, an individual will use their cultural perception to determine if the information they receive is worth their time or not, and if the information is not coded in such a way as to penetrate an individual's cultural barrier, the information will fail to be *delivered* and will be lost. The crux of this situation is that the recipient is often held responsible for assuring that information gets through their cultural barrier, and for decoding the information, even if it is coded in a language they do not understand (DeVito, 2008). An example of this can be found in

scenarios where an immigrant to the United States is expected to assimilate to American culture and learn English if they hope to be successful in this country. However, a true understanding of communication theory suggests that the responsibility actually lies with the *sender* of information to ensure that the message is coded in such a way as to penetrate the recipient's cultural barrier (DeVito, 2008). This requires the sender of the information to possess certain cultural communication skills that will allow them to code information correctly, ensuring that the *message* is not interrupted on its path of travel, and that the recipient can decode the information correctly.

In education, teachers are the *senders* of information, and students are the *recipients*. Teachers and students alike will develop cultural perceptions of the world, through life experience and the development of implicit beliefs, which will impact how they are able to code and decode the information they share between each other. Furthermore, in this scenario, teachers, as the senders of information, bear the brunt of the responsibility to ensure success in this exchange. It is imperative that they possess the communication skills necessary to ensure that they code information correctly to penetrate the cultural barriers of their students. Thus, the call for culturally relevant pedagogy becomes essential to the success of both teacher and student alike.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Culturally relevant pedagogy is a critical means of disseminating cultural capital in such a way that it allows students of various demographics to develop the human capital necessary to be successful, contributing members of society. Coleman (2007) states that "human capital is created by changes in persons that bring about skills and capabilities that make them able to act in new ways" (pp. 100). The purpose of education is to create human capital (skills) in students

that change their behavior and actions in such a way as to benefit society at large. Bourdieu (2007) presents the notion of cultural capital, the ability to amass human and social capital as it relates to class and cultural groups. Bourdieu asserts that cultural capital is how likely or easy is it for a particular subgroup of people, minority students, to obtain human capital, skills, and how that human capital will, in turn, affect that subgroup. In education, culturally relevant pedagogy is the avenue through which cultural capital is disseminated, and human capital built, in minority students.

Culturally relevant pedagogy is a method of teaching that "provides a way for students to maintain their cultural integrity while succeeding academically" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, pp. 476). In other words, culturally relevant pedagogy is teaching in such a way that the students cultural identity becomes a part of the learning experience, and not a hindrance too it. This assertion also applies to the concept of the student's cultural language. This is not limited to a student's native verbal language, though that is certainly a part of the student's cultural identity, and is relevant to ESL academic settings, but rather includes all of the life experiences and innate beliefs that make up the student's perception of the world around them and their relationship to that world. This definition of culturally relevant pedagogy holds closely to theories of cultural communication, and suggests that teachers have an obligation to present information in a way that will not require the student to change their culture to fit the message, as lessons, curriculum, etc., but would require the message to change to fit the culture of the student. This requires a very specific method of information coding on the part of the teacher.

A primary concern in the use of culturally relevant pedagogy is in determining exactly what it means. Many teachers believe that culturally relevant pedagogy simply means celebrating ethnic holidays or infusing pop culture references into their lessons (Irvine, 2010).

While this may make a lesson more relatable to students belonging to diverse cultures, it does

not mean that the information in the lesson is being coded in a way to facilitate a cultural

understanding of the material. Celebrating Black poets like Maya Angelou and Langston

Hughes in a Language Arts class doesn't guarantee that Black students will have a better

understanding of stanza construction and iambic pentameter. However, the same poetry lesson,

presented through the lens of slam poetry and hip-hop culture, would make the material not

only relatable, but also culturally relevant for the students (Low, 2011). This confusion over the

meaning of true culturally relevant pedagogy stems from teachers' perception of the world

around them and their implicit beliefs. These beliefs impact how teachers teach, and, ultimately,

determine how successful they are at exhibiting culturally relevant pedagogy.

Teacher Beliefs and the Impact on Teaching Style

Research suggests that teachers also develop their own cultural barriers and belief

systems based upon many factors, including geographic and cultural origins, which impact their

instructional style (Tao Han, 2015). Pajares (1992) suggests that these beliefs are developed

through the teacher's life experience and memory. These beliefs impact the way they think and

perceive the world around them, which, in turn, impacts how they teach (Nespor, 1987). In

regards to teaching style, this also means that implicit teacher beliefs will impact how they

communicate with their students, and how they code lessons.

In culturally diverse classrooms, where the teacher belongs to the dominant culture, and

the students belong to minority groups, this can cause a problem if culturally relevant pedagogy

is not present. Scenarios like this, where a non-minority teacher is charged with teaching

minority students, is more prevalent in the public education system than not. In the United

States, 84% of the teaching work force is Caucasian, and 54% of the student population come

from minority cultures (Albert Shanker Institute, 2015). This makes it a statistical probability that most minority students will be placed in a classroom with a non-minority teacher. However, if that teacher is basing their teaching style on, and coding their lessons through, their own personal perception of the world, there is a significant chance that their perception of reality is culturally different from their students, and the information in their lessons are not being coded to the benefit of the student's understanding, this could result in a lack of culturally relevant pedagogy, which, in turn can impact student performance. The key to overcoming this challenge is to train teachers how to code their lessons in such away as a to effectively communicate them to students in a culturally relevant way. In other words, teachers should be trained in cultural communication.

Discussion

Communication theory explains the basic relationship between teacher and student, and emphasizes the importance of information coding and decoding. However, communication theory also helps to highlight some of the major challenges facing teachers and students today. These challenges can essentially be described as whether or not the teacher and student are "speaking the same language". Efficient cultural communication can be seen as a solution to these challenges. However, effective cultural communication skills can only be obtained in two ways: teachers either have to develop them on their own, through life experience, or they have to be taught.

Tao Han, et al. (2015), Nespor (1987), and Pajares (1992) assert that life experience, memory, and environment all impact how individuals perceive the world, and this perception of reality impacts their behavior and actions. When this theory is placed into the context of cultural communication, it supports the assertion that every individual creates a cultural lens through

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which they analyze reality, and use this information to determine how to communicate with other elements in this world. In terms of communication, if two individuals come from similar life experiences, then communication between the two becomes, theoretically, natural, given that both parties have similar methods of coding and decoding information, and view things through a similar cultural lens. This concept becomes crucial when applied to specific concerns in education, such as the *achievement gap*. Non-minority students outperform minority students across the board, though minority students make up the numerical majority of the student population in the American public education system (Albert Shanker Institute, 2015). This gap could be a result of the simple fact that non-minority students benefit more from non-minority teachers, who make up the numerical majority of teachers, because their shared cultural similarities afford them a more efficient means of communication. Non-minority students and non-minority teachers code and decode information similarly, and view the world through a similar cultural lens. Thus, non-minority teachers do not have to worry about code switching when communicating information to non-minority students. They are, essentially, already *speaking the same language*.

Non-minority teachers and minority students do not share the same bond. Their cultural lenses are different; they do not code and decode information the same way. Communication between the two is not innately easy, and requires code-switching which, if neither party is taught how to do so successfully, results in information (such as lesson material and curriculum) getting *lost in translation*, reducing the student's chance of success. The solution to this dilemma is to either provide training for non-minority teachers in cultural communication techniques, or increase the number of minority teachers working in the field.

In regards to professional development opportunities for teachers, this solution can be approached from two fronts: pre-service teacher training, and in-field training for teachers. Tao Han, et al. (2015), assert that training programs for pre-service teachers need to incorporate course work that will create safe, collaborative environments that will help future teachers eliminate their personal biases, and overcome the implicit beliefs that cause them to develop instructional practices that will hinder the growth of minority students. One way of achieving this would be to add Communication courses to these pre-service training programs. Course work in the field of Communications could introduce the concepts of coding and decoding, as presented in the basic model of communication, to teachers as they are developing their personal perception of the reality of teaching, before they enter the field. Courses designed specifically to teach cultural communication skills could teach specific communication techniques that will assist these teachers in overcoming the challenges of cultural *mis*communication in the classroom. Similarly, in-field training for existing teachers could achieve the same goal. Professional development for teachers in the field should focus on teaching strategies and practices that will increase code-switching skills and cultural communication between non-minority teachers and minority students.

Another means of increasing cultural communication and, as an extension, culturally relevant pedagogy in American classrooms is to increase the number of minority teachers working in the public education system. School districts, government agencies, and institutions of higher learning should prioritize recruitment efforts that support an increase in the diversification of faculty. Minority teachers bring an innate understanding of the cultural experience of their minority students. Because of this, they view the world through the same cultural lens, and speak the same cultural language. They possess the cultural capital minority

students need in order to be successful academically. Minority students and minority teachers could benefit from the same relationship that non-minority students and non-minority teachers share now; a relationship that does not require code-switching for the dissemination of information. The simple presence of a diversified teacher workforce could be enough to begin to narrow the achievement gap between minority and non-minority students.

The basic model of communication is the simple understanding that human beings share information. Cultural communication ensures that we are sharing information in such a way that diverse groups understand and benefit from it. In education, effective cultural communication is key to ensuring the success of every student, in every classroom. To this end, training teachers in effective cultural communication techniques, or recruiting teachers who possess the cultural capital needed to communicate with diverse cultures, should be the first priority of educators across this country.

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