
Teaching Diversity to Regional Campus Students: Using a Miscommunication Model Technique as an Enrichment Tool

Barbara Mahaffey
Ohio University Chillicothe

Techniques and tools to enhance diversity education taught by college faculty are a research gap. Engaging college students from regional campuses in discussions about diversity may be difficult as sometimes students who live in rural areas have lacked experiences with cultures outside of their communities. Knowing how to discuss diversity in non-threatening discussions are rarely discussed in the literature. Teaching about the many ways people can be diverse is important to students who are pursuing careers working with a variety of people. It is best practices in Human Services courses to promote a college student's knowledge about diversity and multicultural education. Teaching students to recognize diversity can enhance their abilities to engage in small group work discussions with other students and communicate about differences within their culture. The information in this article can be useful for faculty who seek an additional technique or model as a tool to create a classroom discussion about diversity. This article discusses the experiential use of a Miscommunication Model, a creative technique that faculty can use to teach diversity education in a regional campus setting.

Using a Miscommunication Model to Enrich Student Insights

Communicating with college students about diversity can be a major problem area yet it is a critical teaching component necessary to develop their multicultural competencies (Celinska & Swazo, 2016). First, there are no set rules for discussing the differences in students in regional campuses and how they differ from one another. Next, there are possible barriers and cultural rules that may create a distance should diversity become a discussion topic or focused upon during group projects. Further, techniques that facilitate communicating about diversity have been left up to faculty creativity. Lastly, the words to encompass the many ways that a person can be considered diverse have grown exponentially. According to Reynolds and Pope (1991), diversity can be defined as a concept created by humans to

describe the many ways people are different and has been discussed in the literature and defines ways people have been oppressed.

The need for more creative ways to promote diversity education was noted by Carreiro and Kapitulik (2010) whose goal was to promote changing the pedagogy in how non-traditional college students are taught social class inequality. The purposes of teaching diversity in education are to provide student insights and promote acceptance, tolerance, and open discussion about differences. This article explores one technique that faculty can use to demonstrate diversity and allow students to discuss differences with each other in a non-threatening manner.

This model describes many ways that two people are either similar or dissimilar. What began as a directive technique and a communication exercise for counseling was found to be useful in teaching about how humans differ in college courses. This Miscommunication Model was created to help students understand possible barriers while providing a visual tool to describe barriers to human interaction. Also, the Miscommunication Model can be used as a technique to facilitate boundary setting. The technique, examples, possible areas for insight, and usefulness of the Miscommunication Model will be discussed.

Rationale for Using the Miscommunication Model to Teach Diversity

There are several approaches to teaching students about diversity. Many texts discuss the various ways that people are diverse. Students may have been exposed to different mediums such as reading, watching videos, and listening to lectures containing information about discrimination, stereotyping, and prejudices. Other topics such as racial identity development and learning about hate crimes are important components as diversity topics for students.

Kenner and Weinerman (2011) wrote that non-traditional college students learn differently and need to gain new awareness and ways to frame learning strategies to enhance adult learning in college environments. This article proposes a new way of teaching awareness about diversity. Students may benefit from having another diversity educational experience in which they think and experience diversity exploration in dyads or discussion groups. The Miscommunication Model (Mahaffey, 2010, Mahaffey & Wubbolding, 2016) is one such experiential technique that can be taught in several ways. One way is for faculty to lecture and demonstrate the model in the classroom. A more popular way is to ask students to sit in

pairs with each student drawing the model, allowing for time for the dyad to discuss their input and self-disclose items in the drawing of the model. Each student can create a Miscommunication Model with emphasis on the miscommunications they have experienced (see Figure 1 for an example model).

The first aspect of the Miscommunication Model is a large outline of a cloud that extends almost to the outer edges of the paper. The broken line symbolizing the cloud outline represents the environment or situation in which two people are communicating. The slashed lines are not continuous lines because communication and situations could be frequently interrupted, influenced by outside factors, or change at any moment. In the center of the page is a drawing of two people. There is space left between the two people for an arrow pointing from the mouth of Person A to the ear of the second person, Person B. It is preferable that the two people face one another. The second person has an arrow drawn starting from their head to below their feet leading back to Person A (refer to Figure 1). This part of the Miscommunication Model is a basic construction of an interpersonal communication dyad found in most Communication Studies books or lectures. What is different about the Miscommunication Model is that inside the situation or environment inside the cloud includes a listing of the many variables or factors detailing ways that people are diverse.

Areas of Miscommunication Different Traits and Characteristics

It has been noted that humans have a multitude of ways to be diverse. Students can be asked to consider the many ways they differ from each other as a homework assignment, a survey exercise, or a class discussion. In teaching students about those traits, it is interesting to see how many ways people are diverse. A partial listing of the different traits regional campus students can have include: age, education, sex, gender/gender orientation, race/racial identity, military status, country of origin, interests, intelligences, language, personalities, handicaps, developmental differences, culture, beliefs, morals and values, coping and defense mechanisms, body language (Mehrabian, 1972), learning styles, abilities, communication styles, work history, physical appearances, attitudes, marital status, problem-solving approaches, motivational levels, socio-economic status, and student status.

One of the most important ways that two students are different is in their past experiences and influences. Sometimes the term *past*

experiences is drawn inside a conversation bubble that is attached to one of the people. This topic can be an endless source of diversity conversation. One example of differing past experiences involves reactions to assignments, personal preferences, or emotional responses to terms such as fears, love, discrimination, hatred, or blame. Another important aspect of people that can create miscommunications is the differences in *family rule books*, a term originally coined by Virginia Satir (1972). Sibling and family status are two topics that can be included in this section of the drawing. This is usually drawn in-between the two people in the diagram in a bubble. This may symbolize one way that students may differ in culture learning that occurs and is represented in architecture, art, religion, spirituality, dress, or other socially and/or cultural learned rules in families. Similar to family rules and rule making are classroom rules. The students can be engaged in talking about classroom etiquette during this discussion.

Virginia Satir (1972) wrote about the goal of people becoming “levelers” in communication and noted that there are personal communication styles that have interfered with level communication in people such as: one that placates (a placater), computer, blamer, and distracter. These styles and other aspects of leadership styles or skills may also be added to the Miscommunication Model (Mahaffey, 2010).

Perceptions, Thinking and Speaking Ratios, or Brain Differences

One way to challenge students to learn about diversity is to discuss perceptual differences. Included in the diagram drawing of the Miscommunication Model are several ways that people differ in perceptions, thought to speech ratios, and brain differences. It may be shocking for students to hear that the way a brain functions is not always accurate or fine-tuned. Optical illusions have been typical student observations as an example of perceptual differences during the demonstration of the Miscommunication Model technique. Interesting class discussions can include bringing up differentiations in male and female genetics, personal filters, unconscious and conscious decision-making skills, negative versus positive thinking, and biases.

An important way that people differ has been called “the ratio of thinking to speaking.” People think much faster than they can talk. This difference can be illustrated by drawing opposite brains. Note that students can leave out vital information during written answers on tests or conversations without realizing their thoughts have not been

communicated. Students can usually recall that they could have sworn they discussed a topic that the other person later tells them has not existed in conversation. This is another example of how the brain ‘lies’ to us. Students also fall prey to procrastinations, distractions, or have completely different processing speeds. It is hoped that students who draw the brains can also realize that people have similarities as well as differences in perceptions.

The speed at which people think is also different amongst others; and the rate and focus of thoughts may vary with emotional stimulation and other stimuli (i.e., pre-existing responsibilities, intoxication). Discussions about brain processing speed or other influences such as disorders or medical conditions (i.e., stroke differences in male versus female brains) can also be mentioned in this classroom experience. Homeostasis is another term that students can learn in relation to perceptual differences. Victim and witness statement discrepancies and the potential for perceptual differences can also merit discussion. Listening, and cultural beliefs about listening, are important personal variables that may interfere with communication.

Daily Life Interferences

An area in the Miscommunication Model happens because regional campus students are busy with activities of daily living. Some of the many factors that can create miscommunication are student’s experiences with life events such as bill paying, financial aid, family obligations, major news events, and the need for community resources. This topic in the Miscommunication Model is usually drawn as another conversation bubble that is connected to one, or both, of the people in the center of the drawing.

Words, Emotion Words and Language

The last way in the Miscommunication Model that diversity awareness is important is the influence of how we use language. Emotion words are the most difficult to explain. For example, love has many dictionary definitions. Terms that describe concrete items such as “table” can have different meanings for people, and a person’s constructed meaning may be dependent upon their culture and experiences.

Verbal communication is commonly misunderstood and/or misinterpreted. One suggested discussion for dyads is the different ways we communicate using “feeling” words versus the how people will “think”

about feelings and ways to describe and/or express emotions. The many meanings associated with language combined with nonverbal communication are possible topics. Continued discussions may be held about cultural differences in emotion words and linguistics. Gestures and body language differentiation is another rich possibility that can be included in the Miscommunication Model discussion.

Conclusions

Many times, students and faculty struggle with communication about diversity topics. One way to accomplish a nonthreatening technique of communicating about diversity is through the use of the Miscommunication Model. Discussing the variety of barriers, influences, and ways that people miscommunicate can lead to insights, catharsis, goal setting, and classroom working alliance building.

Knowing how to promote classroom communication among regional campus students is important. The Miscommunication Model is used as a creative technique that includes visual and verbal components. It allows students to process intrapersonal and interpersonal interactions in dyads. Diversity education has an overarching purpose of defining multiple challenges, promoting tolerance, and gaining acceptance of people with other students who have diverse background experiences. This model promotes increased knowledge, skills, and awareness about a wide variety of human diversities. It also provides a method of insight building for students. The Miscommunication Model is an important and engaging tool for regional campus faculty.

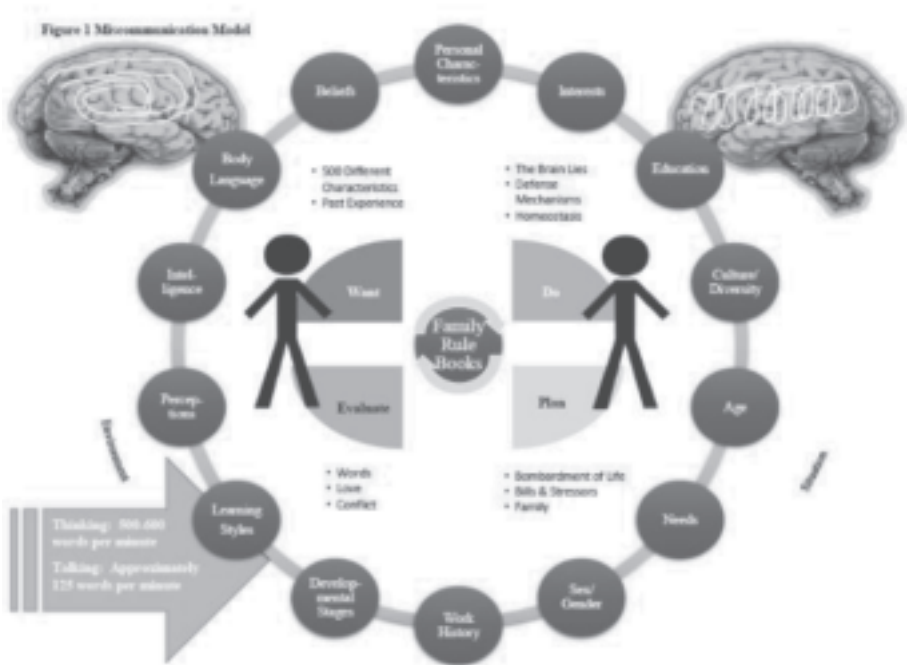


Figure 1. An Example of The Miscommunication Model

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Personal Biography

This author is an Associate Professor of Human Services Technology who has presented on a national and state level and published several book chapters and articles about mentoring, therapeutic alliance, adoption counseling, and two articles about the Miscommunication Model uses.

Barbara Mahaffey, Ohio University Chillicothe: mahaffey@ohio.edu