

Using Literature for Inter-Cultural Training

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ABSTRACT

Literary texts deal with reality; though, the reality literature offers is an aesthetic and subjective one that cannot be tested empirically, but this doesn't lessen its validity and usefulness; for instance to convey the essence of a culture in a lively and innovative fashion. It doesn't provide the social, historical, and cultural conditions of a society like texts of social sciences. Contrastively, literary texts provide a kind of non-discursive knowledge which is deeper than that of social sciences. Although a literary text is self-referential it mirrors the complexity of experience through its internal relationship. For example, dramatic voices in work, though fictional, represent the people who inhabit a given society at a particular period. Literature, hence, is somehow a different kind of knowledge which is important for human civilization, not in any way less important than empirical knowledge. The relation between literature and culture is reciprocal. Culture affects what one writes and what one writes affects our culture. Literature not only records culture but influences it. Literature offers insights into mentality, psychology, and attitudes which cannot be gleaned from conventional sociological and historical sources. They have an originality and aesthetic vitality that cannot be matched by the conventional materials for Inter-cultural training. An appropriately designed and presented use of literature-based modules can very well supplement the conventional materials of Inter-cultural training.

KEYWORDS

Cultural Conditions; Human Civilization; Sociological; Conventional Materials.

Inter-cultural training or cross-cultural training means preparing people for Inter-cultural communication and experiences. It develops cultural awareness and sensitivity.

“Inter-cultural Training enables the individual to learn both content and skills that will facilitate effective Inter-cultural interaction by reducing misunderstandings and inappropriate behaviour.” (Black et al, 1990)

It “is training that gives people the necessary information, skills and attitudes to enable them to adjust and to function productively in a country other than their own.” (Kohls et al 2003) In general, Inter-cultural training is defined as that which increases the competence of individuals to function in Inter-cultural situations domestically as well as abroad. Though, inter-cultural skills are mostly thought as business skills, in general they are much need in multicultural societies.

The resources used for Inter-cultural Training range from training

games to psychometric cultural competence and adaptability assessments, from extensively researched models of culture to personal anecdotes.

The main tools used by Inter-cultural trainers in order of frequency of use, as reported in a recent international study (SIETAR 2004), are:

- Models for understanding culture and cultural dynamics
- Case studies
- Exercises and activities
- Simulations and role plays
- Training games
- Profiles (country and culture)
- Checklists and tip sheets
- Assessments of intercultural competence/readiness
- Intensive group sessions.

The use of literature in business studies is very limited. This is partly because literature is widely considered to be impractical and something not dealing with “reality”. This view is reflected in H. Ned Seelye’s book *Teaching Culture: Strategies for Inter-Cultural Communication*, where he says that at best literature can be used to exemplify knowledge gained from the social sciences. Prima facie this model of literature as an example and social sciences as source makes sense. It is true that one needs empirical knowledge about a foreign culture to prevent people from misreading non-existing values, morals and attitudes in foreign literary texts. Then, one may ask the question why we should read literary texts at all. Are they not superfluous and redundant if they only repeat what we already know through the social sciences? Seelye’s statement asks us to ponder what a literary text reveals about a culture in which it is written and to which it responds.

Literary texts deal with reality; though, the reality literature offers is an aesthetic and subjective one that cannot be tested empirically, but this doesn’t lessen its validity and usefulness; for instance to

convey the essence of a culture in a lively and innovative fashion. It doesn’t provide the social, historical, and cultural conditions of a society like texts of social sciences. In contrast, literary texts provide a kind of non-discursive knowledge which is deeper than that of social sciences; and although the literary text is self-referential, it mirrors the complexity of experience through its internal relationship. For example, dramatic voices in work, though fictional, represent the people who inhabit a given society at a particular period. Literature, hence, offers a different kind of knowledge which is important for human civilization, in no way less important than empirical knowledge.

Fortunately, there are people who have realized this importance and potential of literature and have bridged the gap between the liberal arts and commerce. Ironically business people have taken the lead, leaving academic people behind. In IIMs the premier Indian institutions for nurturing future entrepreneurs and corporate leaders, essential managerial aspects in epics such as Mahabharata and Ramayana is made use of to teach leadership skills.

H. S. Mohapatra, mentions in a popular article:

“The curious phenomenon of ... Hewlett & Packard insisting on the pleasures of language and literature, of Ken Adelman, an ex-arms dealer turned management consultant, teaching company CEOs the dos and don’ts of business via Shakespeare; of Tom Peters recommending a literary regimen as part of his package for excellence; of E.H. McGrath asking his students at XLRI across India and us in his hugely popular Basic Managerial Skills for All to ‘make every word tell’ in the manner of our best known writers of prose such as V.S. Naipaul, Graham Greene and E.M. Forster.”

Language is the carrier of culture. It is a part of culture and plays a very important role. Without language, culture does not exist. On the one hand, language is influenced and shaped by culture. It is the symbolic representation of a people comparing their historical and cultural backgrounds as well as their approach to life and their ways of living and thinking. It shapes perception and shapes culture. Culture patterns, customs and ways of life are expressed in language. The obvious choice, hence, of literary texts for inter-cultural purposes should be in the language of the target culture; however it is by no means the only option. Texts can also be in translation in the student's first or second language. Also, the literary texts selected need to be modern for students to identify with readily with. Contemporary texts with professional themes and settings, if chosen will interest the students. Nevertheless, receptiveness of students to literature is likely to vary, depending particularly on their aesthetic leanings and background. Also, for tapping the potential of literary texts for inter-cultural purposes shift is desirable in orientation. Focus from a linguistic, generic and thematic analysis of texts to a culture-oriented analysis is essential. Hence, for inter-cultural training literary texts should be studied with pre-reading and post-reading, focusing exercises on the cultural images and related aspects contained in the texts.

Literary texts should be selected which illustrate aspects of the target culture. In the opinion of Alan Pulverness (1996: 11) text selection should be based on the kinds of cultural information

literary texts can dramatize, i.e., the whole way of life, social attitudes like the class system, political values, the state of the nation and language and manners.

For example, *The Death of the Salesman* deals with concepts of success like the "American Dream" which plays an important role in American culture. The "American Dream" is the idea that any man or woman can make his or her own fortune, despite his or her past. Similarly, a foreign reader can get a good picture of the social hierarchy and tensions in the literary writings of Arundhati Roy. For instance, the novel *The God of Small Things* captures important elements of Kerala life like communism, caste system, and the Syrian Christian way of life. Likewise, the works of the Turkish writer and Nobel Laureate of 2006 Orhan Pamuk give the reader a view of the Turkish society suffering from a loss of identity due to a conflict between Eastern and Western values and infested with deep-rooted tensions between East and West and tradition and modernism under Islamic dictatorship.

The relation between literature and culture is mutual. Culture affects what one writes and what one writes affects culture. Literature not only records culture but influences it. It offers insights into mentality, psychology, and attitudes which cannot be gleaned from conventional sociological or historical sources. They have an originality and aesthetic vitality that cannot be matched by the conventional materials for inter-cultural training. An appropriately designed and presented use of literature-based modules can very well supplement the conventional materials of inter-cultural training.

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