How We Do Our Intercultural Communication Work

(Like most SIETAR members I’m full of excitement and anticipation about the SIETAR-USA 11th Annual Conference, this year in Denver, Colorado with the theme of Risk and Resilience in an Intercultural World. I, like you, get professionally recharged with new training approaches, unusual research findings, and the chance to put my networking skills to the test. Whether you plan to attend the conference (which I hope you are) or to attend in spirit, amidst all this energizing activity, I challenge you to contemplate something else: why and how you do intercultural communication work.

The “why” is what keeps us going in the field no matter what the social climate or the financial obstacles we encounter. It is the values that help us to get up in the morning and face another challenge. These may be your hope or desire to leave this world a better place for your grandchildren or to believe in the intrinsic value of cultural heterogeneity over homogeneity. Or you may have the firm conviction that no lasting peace in a society can occur without justice. Most intercultural communicators have defined altruistic drivers for the work they do.

I challenge you to also examine the “how” of your intercultural communication work. Being an intercultural communicator is a loosely defined job description that varies from country to county and task to task. As intercultural communication professionals we have always struggled for clarification on this issue. But no matter what your self-styled job description, how do you do your intercultural communication work? What are the guides for your behaviors, conduct, actions and yes, your inactions? What are your ethics?

There are various ways you can examine your professional intercultural communication ethics. The first is professional. If you call yourself a professional there is a generalized cultural assumption that your work would be based on honesty (always being truthful), integrity (doing what I say I will do), trust (not abridging confidence), etc. These are bedrock ethics of a professional doing any work. What then are your ethics driving your professional intercultural communication work? With the help of the pioneering work of intercultural communicators Judith Martin and Thomas Nakayama (2007) there are three broad questions, which by no means are exhaustive, that each of us may ask ourselves to begin to identify our own intercultural communication ethics. First, do I practice self-reflexivity, which is the process of learning to understand ourselves and our position in society? Second, while learning about other cultures and people, do I never lose sight of the humanity factors involved? Third, is the transformative nature of my work not only beneficial to the individual but to the larger interdependent societies?

An integral part of risk and resilience in our intercultural communication work is being secure in our foundational ethics. At the upcoming annual gathering there will be opportunities to talk with fellow professionals about the concrete as well as theoretical ethical dilemmas of doing intercultural communication work. As you formulate your personal code of ethics, SIETAR wants to hear from you. Consider joining the conversation either by contacting the Board’s Ethics Chair or in person, April 13-16, 2011 in Denver, CO.

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