

Communicating with foreigners

Communication between the UDLA and its international students starts when the student is still in his home country. The first contact the student has with UDLA is either with its printed information material or its website. These two information sources represent UDLA and are consulted when the student wants to decide where to spend his time abroad. If the student cannot find the information he needs, misses out important details or just does not understand it, problems can arise later on. But at this stage, it might lead to the decision to not even come to UDLA.

After the student has decided in favour of the UDLA and has been accepted, he gets additional 'impersonal' information in form of printed brochures, or 'personal' information in the form of e-mails from the person in charge of the relevant program at UDLA (exchange program, summer courses or full-time studies). In some cases, the people in charge are contacted by telephone.

The spatial distance between the student's home country and UDLA makes it, for the majority of students, impossible to visit UDLA before they begin studying here. Therefore, there is no possibility to visit UDLA in order to find out what he needs to bring, and what is better to leave at home, etc. In this stage, it is important for the student to get clear and easily understandable information about everything he needs to do before he comes to Mexico, and what to bring with him. After he arrives at the UDLA, it could be very difficult to get additional papers or needed equipment from home. Arranging papers in the home country from Mexico can be complicated and slow going, which would lead to a delay of administrative processes. Mexican custom regulations make it impossible to get used things sent over, for example a needed laptop, camera, etc.

The process of communication

Providing information in written form, digital or printed, is part of the communication process. Communication is a process of encoding and decoding of messages. As Gudykunst and Kim describe it, "*Encoding refers to the process of putting thoughts, feelings, emotions, or attitudes, for example, in a form recognizable by others. ... Decoding is the process of perceiving and interpreting, or making sense of, incoming messages and stimuli from the environment. How we encode and decode messages is influenced by our experiential background, including not only our unique individual experiences but also our shared group and cultural ones.*" In personal communication, facial or verbal expressions can inform the sender if the message has been understood. If not, additional explanations can be provided. The problem in the case of 'impersonal' giving of information is that the sender cannot see the receiver's reaction to the sent message. This makes clear the importance of information design, which is, according to Sless "*a polite craft, a considerate craft, one devoted to helping people and providing them with information they can use.*"

After having arrived at UDLA, face-to-face communication between the foreign student and Mexicans start. If beforehand information from UDLA has not been clear and the student did not bring all the necessary papers he will discover that he has to do a lot of unexpected administrative work or incur additional

William B. Gudykunst and Young Yun Kim, *Communication with Strangers* (USA: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1984) 6.

Sless, "*Theory for practice*"

costs. Then, he will start his sojourn with a frustrating experience, leaving him in an angry mood. His being angry or upset would give the intercultural communication a bad start. The student would probably accuse UDLA of not providing the right information, whereas his Mexican communication partner would take a defensive position and accuse the student of not having read properly the provided information. This could worsen the whole communicational situation, which is difficult anyway. As Bochner and Furnham state, “*When persons from different cultures meet, they will have difficulty in communicating with one another to the extent that their respective ‘codes’ differ, and to the extent to which they are unaware that these differences exist.*” Different cultures have different ways of expression, use different gestures and often speak a different language. “*Language is one of the major vehicles through which we encode messages*” state Gudykunst and Kim. Problems and misunderstandings can arise, because “*the non-native speaker of the language may encode sentences that are correct on the surface but do not recognise differences in meaning in particular contexts.*” The situation worsens for foreign students accepted to the UDLA with little or no knowledge of Spanish. Their disability to communicate in Spanish – not understanding or not being able to express what they want – leads to insecurity and anxiety. Both sides, sender and recipient, will be insecure about the other’s capacity of understanding the message right. The sender cannot be sure if the recipient understands the message the way he meant it, and the recipient does not know if he understood the message right.

Bochner and Furnham, 205.

Gudykunst and Kim, 31.

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Creating intercultural learning experiences

To be able to communicate properly with Mexicans, to be able to adapt his behaviour and way of communication to theirs, to be understood and to prevent offending them by a strange cultural behaviour, the foreigner has to learn the host nation’s culture, its attitudes, values, beliefs and norms. “*One important condition must be satisfied before such culture-learning can proceed, namely that sojourners must have close, perhaps even intimate, links with members of the host society who are able and willing to act as culture friends and mediators.*” But as Otten says, “*intercultural learning needs reflection of individual and collective social experience with people from other cultures rather than the mere contact as such*”, therefore interaction between Mexicans and foreigners is needed. Another problem is that “*domestic students tend to stay in their established circle of friends*”, according to Otten. Therefore, as I stated on page 10 that it would be very helpful and should be in UDLA’s interest to promote contact and relationships between its Mexican and international students.

Bochner and Furnham, 15.

Otten, 15.

Otten, 14.

But this is not applicable only to the foreign student. Additionally, Mexicans should take in account cultural differences when communicating with foreigners and perhaps change their attitude and behaviour towards them. In the example of UDLA employees who have to deal with foreigners, as in the International Office, Admissions, CILC, Medical Service or student housing, should be aware of the existence of cultural differences and should not be offended by them. UDLA’s employees “*can build up interaction more easily due to having the chance to use the mother tongue and due to the knowledge of institutional terminology and setting.*” And should take in account that the foreign stu-

Otten, 16.

dent *“is less familiar with the cultural environment in general and the institutional routines in particular.”* A problem is that some of them have never been abroad and therefore *“cannot identify with a foreign student’s behaviour (e.g., segregation, isolation, emotional overreactions, physical stress) as a temporary reaction to the psychological stress that is imposed on him or her by the different cultural environment. The behaviour of the international student might be misinterpreted as lacking willingness to integrate.”* Therefore cultural training and information for these employees could help them get prepared to deal with international students and to explain to the foreigner cultural differences and the way things like administrative processes or institutional routines work in Mexico.

Otten, 16.

Otten, 21.

The goals UDLA should have in relation to international students could agree with what Brislin and Yoshida have identified as major goals of intercultural training: *“(a) assisting people in overcoming obstacles that interfere with their sense of well-being, (b) developing positive and respectful relationships with others in the host culture, (c) assisting people with accomplishing tasks associated with their work and (d) helping people effectively deal with the inevitable stress that accompanies the cross-cultural experience.”*

Otten, 20.

Active support by the university is needed, because, as Matthias Otten states, *“cultural diversity and internationalisation do not automatically lead to intercultural contacts and intercultural learning experiences.”* Clear and easily usable information in printed or digital form should be given to the student before his arrival to Mexico, to help make the student aware of cultural differences he will encounter and help him to prepare for his sojourn. Providing mediators or encouraging interaction between Mexican and foreign students after his arrival could help the foreign students feel comfortable during their stay in Mexico and help Mexican students and employees to gain intercultural experiences.

Otten, 14.