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Contextual variations in communication
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Overview
This paper briefly considers 'context' as one of anthropologist and cross-cultural researcher Edward Hall's (1914-2009) three dimensions influencing cultural interactions: time, context and space. Hall viewed culture as influencing every aspect of human life. According to Hall, "it is the least studied aspect of culture that influences behaviour in the deepest and most subtle ways". (1977:14)[i]. Interesting use has been made of Hall's theory in the attempt to understand Malaysian culture[ii] and some of the Confucian Heritage cultures[iii].

High context culture versus low context culture
In his important book Beyond Culture (1977) Hall proposed the concept of 'high' versus 'low' context as a way of understanding cultural orientations and how they intercept. High and low are in continuum, although interpretations of what are considered either high or low are dependent on the perception of the observer. While these terms are useful in describing aspects of culture, it is probably misleading to say a culture is either 'high' or 'low', since all cultures contain both aspects. Thus 'home' students can experience academic cultures as 'high' context, and find accessing such culture very difficult since they don't carry the context information internally and are not part of the 'in' group.

Low context and the world of words
Hall also proposed that high context culture is one in which people are deeply involved with one another. Communication in these contexts is much more implicit. A low-context culture is one in which people are highly individualised, and there is little involvement with others, making communication between people explicit and impersonal. Low context cultures live in a 'word world' thinking that words create reality. Hall argues this is a mistake, words do not convey every meaning in a message; there are underlying subtleties that provide wholeness and context. In a high-context culture, most of the message is already in the persons, and little is made explicit or made explicit. The differences between the two orientations are reflected below:

Low-context Culture	High-context Culture
• Overtly displays meanings through direct communication forms. Believes in explicit (literal) communication. • Values individualism. Values individual initiative and decision making. • Tends to develop transitory personal relationships. Keeps job tasks separate from relationships. • Emphasizes inner logic. Follows the letter of the law. • Values direct verbal interaction and	• Implicitly embeds meanings at different levels of the sociological context. Utilizes figurative and approximate language. • Values group sense. • Tends to take time to cultivate and establish permanent, personal relationships. Expects decision-making within the relationship. Sees tasks as a function of the relationship. • Believes laws can be shaped by circumstances.

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is less able to read non-verbal expressions. • Tends to use 'logic' to present ideas • Tends to emphasize highly structured messages, give details, and place great stress on words and technical signs. Presents, facts, statistics and other details. • Perceive highly verbal persons favourably. Becomes uncomfortable with silence.	• Emphasizes spiral logic • Values indirect verbal interaction and is more able to read nonverbal expressions. Prefers indirect style in writing and speaking. • Tends to be more feeling in expression. Subordinates use of detailed information. • Tends to give simple ambiguous, non-contextualising messages • Perceive highly verbal persons less favourably. Relies on non-verbal communication. Respects and utilizes silence.

Different understandings in the purpose of communication

The essential difference between the two on this cultural continuum is that High Context cultures view communication as a social lubricant as a means of developing group relationships so that accuracy of information is less important that the group need to cohere. It is not uncommon for students to agree to do something (even though they know they will not do it) for the sake of not offending the lecturer making the request. In a Low-Context culture, accuracy is paramount, the emphasis is on transmission of the information, and the information is considered neutral. For the student used to highly supported environments in which instructions are given as commands from an authority, and who fail to understand the linear logic of the communication, such information may be difficult to digest. Both cultures value information and social aspects of communication differently, and both emphasize and recognise the purpose of communication, differently. Emotionality and rationality, directness, indirectness, role of confrontation and use of non-verbal communication are each valued differently. Two examples serve to point out what may happen when individuals with different cultural contexts intercept:

Example 1:

A student from China (High Context, or HC) is going to study in the UK (Low Context, LC). Before leaving China he received a great deal of written information, typical of that generated by a low-context (UK) culture: (1) handbook for international students, (2) Travel Information, visa information and instructions from the Foreign Office, (3) The University Prospectus, (4) Information from the Students Union (5) The course handbook, (6) Information about accommodation (etc). When he arrives there is no one at the airport to meet him, which makes him feel very insecure. In the reverse, an appreciation of this insecurity becomes apparent if one considers a lecturer travelling to China (High Context) and being told "you will receive all necessary information when you arrive!". In HC cultures, formal communication is kept to a bare minimum and is used only when necessary, in LC cultures, very little is left 'between the lines'.

Example 2:

Mr Li, a senior lecturer, is visiting Nottingham from Malaysia. He is visiting a research institute, and meets Jon Baker, a reader. Jon suggests they set up a meeting. Mr Li responds, "that will be interesting". "When shall we meet?" asks Jon. "I am here for only one week. This is going to be a very busy week"

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replies Mr Li. "It sounds like it will be" says Jon. "How about 10 o'clock tomorrow, here?" "10 o'clock tomorrow?" asks Mr Li thoughtfully. "Right" says Jon "see you tomorrow". "Yes tomorrow…" says Mr Li.
The next day at 10 o'clock there is no sign of Mr Li. Jon phones the school secretary to ask about Mr Li's whereabouts. "He's in Leicester today on important business" is the reply…

High context cultures may be difficult to enter for the first time as an outsider because the newcomer is missing contextual information and has no close relationships with the group. Low contexts are relatively easy to enter because much of the information required to participate is provided and greater value is placed on task accomplishment rather than relationship building). One useful link in exploring this further is: Culture at Work[iv])

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November 2009

[i] Hall, E.T. (1976) Beyond Culture. Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday.

[ii] Salleh, L.M. (2005) "High/Low Context Communication: The Malaysian Malay Style" in Proceedings of the 2005 Association for Business Communication Annual Convention. <http://www.businesscommunication.org/conventions/Proceedings/2005/PDFs/09ABC05.pdf> Accessed: 29 September 2009.

[iii] Kim, D., Pan Y. and Part, H.S. (1998) "High- versus Low-Context Culture: A Comparison of Chinese, Korean, and American Cultures". Psychology and Marketing Vol 15(6): 507-521.

[iv] <http://www.culture-at-work.com/highlow.html> Accessed: 29 September 2009.

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