

Intercultural Communication and Global Democracy: A Deweyan Perspective

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Abstract

Understanding intercultural communication as the exchange of information between individuals of different cultural backgrounds, theorists of this field are primarily concerned with mapping the patterns of cultural similarities and differences, revealing the effects of cultural factors on the process of intercultural communication, sorting the components of intercultural communication competence, and seeking the formulas to remove misunderstandings and breakdowns in intercultural communication. By contrast, American philosopher John Dewey takes a moral approach to define communication as individually distinctive members of a community sharing experiences, participating in joint activities, cooperating in free social inquiry and the distribution of its conclusions, transforming habits, and ultimately making life rich and varied in meanings. This Deweyan moralist perspective can be applied to situate intercultural communication studies in the context of a globalizing world where global democracy, though far from playing any noticeable role in regulating international relations at present, should ultimately rule if humankind is to have a future and continue to thrive. From a Deweyan perspective, the construction of a global public in a global democratic community is the foundation or precondition of global democracy. This is where intercultural communication, understood not only as practical means to satisfy immediate individual, organizational and national needs in intercultural contexts, but also as consummate ends or an intercultural democratic way of life, could make its unique contribution.

Keywords: global democracy, John Dewey, intercultural communication

Introduction

It is generally agreed that we live in an age of globalization. But when did it begin? Some historians might point at October 24, 1946, when the first grainy, black-and-white photos of our earth were taken from an altitude of 65 miles by a 35-millimeter motion picture camera riding on a V-2 missile launched from the New Mexico desert. Clyde Holliday, the engineer who developed the camera, wrote in *National Geographic* in 1950, the V-2 photos showed for the first time “how our Earth would look to visitors from another planet coming in on a space ship.” That was the first time human beings saw with their own eyes their habitats on separate continents as one globe. Other historians would trace further back to the late 19th century when the second industrialization coupled with Western imperialism incorporated all the countries of the globe into one world market system. But that first stage of modern globalization slowed

down during the period from the start of the First World War until the third quarter of the twentieth century. According to the official observation of the United Nations, the advanced stage of globalization emerged during the fourth quarter of the twentieth century.¹ Another historical point of time in the development of globalization might be August 6, 1991, when British scientist Berners-Lee posted a short summary of the World Wide Web project on the alt.hypertext newsgroup, marking the debut of the Internet age.

Obviously it is futile to try to pin down a particular date as the beginning of globalization because it did not take place within one day or one year or even one decade. It was, according to Held (2000), “a set of processes which shift the spatial form of human organization and activity to transcontinental or inter-regional patterns of activity, interaction and the exercise of power” (p. 19). Viewed historically, globalization has undergone an accelerating evolution process over centuries on three dimensions: “1) the extensiveness of networks and connections; 2) the intensity of flows and levels of activity within these networks; and 3) the impact of these phenomena on particular bounded communities” (Held, 2000, p. 19).

The first two dimensions indicate the growing interconnectedness of the peoples and their activities across national borders. Economically, a rising number of giant multinational corporations has led to the rapid expansion of international trade reaching unprecedented levels; at the same time, global financial flows have also grown tremendously, creating a more integrated financial system than has ever been known. Culturally, the inexorable spreading of English as the dominant language of the global society, the vigorous prosperity of international tourism, the rapid escalation of mass communication across national borders launched by the dramatic globalization of telecommunications and the booming success of international multimedia conglomerates have ushered in the birth of a global village, for good or bad. Environmentally, for the first time in world history, human beings spread in different zones of the globe have found themselves confronting a myriad of serious common problems such as global warming, trans-boundary pollution, desertification, resource over-consumption, etc. Institutionally and legally, the behavior of nation-states of the world is more and more constrained and regulated by various international organizations and laws (Held, 2000, pp. 20-26).

The “stretching” and “deepening” of the interactions among nations and peoples of the world have exerted far-reaching impact on the local communities and individuals around the globe. As McGrew (1997) commented:

...in the context of intense global and regional interconnectedness, the very idea of political community as an exclusive territorially delimited unit is at best unconvincing and at worst anachronistic. In a world in which global warming connects the long-term fate of many Pacific islands to the actions of tens of millions of private motorists across the globe, the conventional territorial conception of political community appears profoundly inadequate. Globalization weaves together, in highly complex and abstract

¹ Summary of the Annual Review of Developments in Globalization and Regional Integration in the Countries of the ESCWA Region by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia.

systems, the fate of households, communities and peoples in distant regions of the globe. (p. 237)

Faced with this growing tendency of global interconnectedness, theorists of globalization have proposed various scenarios, among which five major ones are worthy of examination here, namely benevolent imperialism, nationalism, multilateralism, localism and global democracy. Benevolent imperialism advocates the use of power for the United States to shape the world according to its values. Nationalism or realism maintains that all states use their power in pursuit of their national interests, that balance-of-power politics is not only a descriptive, but also a prescriptive view of the world, that it is the duty of national government officials to defend national interests, and that accepting international constraints on the exercise of power is not only undesirable, but also dangerous. Multilateralism, sometimes called liberal internationalism, subscribes to the existing international institutions within which nation states solve global problems and resolve conflicts among their respective national interests. Localism is strongly committed to the fulfillment of human rights throughout the world, yet insists that sustainable economic development and ambitious global objectives could be achieved through national or local decision making (Jacobs, 2007, pp. 69-93).

The globalization scenario, which is the most idealistic (not necessarily utopian), most morally justified and worthy of our utmost devotion, is global democracy or cosmopolitan democracy.

Jacobs (2007) defines it as “the application of key concepts of liberal representative democracy to the global level of government, which would happen incrementally over several decades by developing institutional innovations already adopted by some international institutions” (p. 94).

Archibugi (1998) defines it as “an ambitious project whose aim is to achieve a world order based on the rule of law and democracy” (p. 198). He accepts David Beetham’s definition of democracy as “a mode of decision-making about collectively-binding rules and policies over which the people exercise control, and the most democratic arrangement to be that where all members of the collectivity enjoy effective equal rights to take part in such decision-making directly” (Archibugi, 1998, p. 199). He stresses the need of developing democracy within nations, among states and at the global level simultaneously (Archibugi, 1998, p. 216).

For Held (2000), global democracy or cosmopolitan democracy is “a double-sided process” involving “not just the deepening of democracy within a national community, but also the extension of democratic processes across territorial borders” (p. 30). He writes, “In a world where transnational actors and forces cut across the boundaries of national communities in diverse ways, and where powerful states make decisions not just for their peoples but for others as well, the questions of who should be accountable to whom, and on what basis, do not easily resolve themselves” (Held, 1998, p. 22). Therefore, in order for democracy to function in a world of “overlapping communities of fate” (Held, 1998, p. 22) new institutions and mechanisms of accountability need to be established.

For Falk (1998), global democracy, just like domestic democracy, means “the accountability of those with the power of decision, participation by those who are subject to governance structures, transparency of governance operations, adherence to established procedures and

rules with means for redress in the event of perceived deviance, and the advocacy of non-violence as a core value with respect to security and development policy” (p. 328).

The above normative prescriptions have set beautiful goals for global democracy; the remaining question is: how can we get there from here? Theorists have offered various road maps for democratizing globalization, for example, encouraging nation-states to extend internal democracy, reforming the United Nations, creating a global parliament, establishing an effective, accountable, international army, developing an interconnected global legal system, strengthening the European Union and other regional organizations, fostering the growth of civil society, etc.² These solutions almost exclusively concentrate on applying democratic principles in transforming existing institutions or creating new mechanisms, ignoring the possibility that all these positive changes could never happen unless something more fundamental is ready, that is, “the creation of a global perspective and values in the depths of people’s hearts and minds” (Sakamoto, 1991, p. 122). In the same light, Held mentions in passing the following two “general conditions” among five as essential for the establishment of global democracy:

- 1) Recognition by growing numbers of peoples of increasing interconnectedness of political communities in diverse domains including the social, cultural, economic and environmental;
- 2) Development of an understanding of overlapping “collective fortunes” which require collective democratic solutions—locally, nationally, regionally and globally. (Held, 1998, p. 26)

The major concern of this paper is: How can we bring about this shared “recognition” and “understanding” among citizens of the world? My answer from a Deweyan perspective, to put it briefly, is: **intercultural communication**.

Why intercultural communication then? Because if we do not choose intercultural communication, we have only two other worse options, imposing or drifting. With the former, we can imagine a superpower that wields its overwhelming influence, economic, cultural and military, to impose on the citizens of the world, for hidden national interests, its provincial values often in the name of promoting universal values of democracy, human rights, peace and free trade. This imposing way of globalizing democracy goes against democratic principles and is doomed to fail democracy in the end. With the latter option of drifting, human beings submit to determinism, believing that without any human efforts to give direction and guidance, globalization will work its way out of chaos one day for the miraculous realization of global democracy. This drifting way of laissez-faire globalization has already proved ineffective and dangerous economically, environmentally and politically.

The last resort seems to be **intercultural communication**.

Understanding intercultural communication as the exchange of information between individuals and groups of different cultural backgrounds, theorists of this field are currently preoccupied, justifiably, with mapping the patterns of cultural similarities and differences, revealing the effects of cultural factors on the process of intercultural communication, sorting the components of

² See Held’s and Archibugi’s detailed proposals in Daniele Archibugi, David Held & Martin Köhler (Eds.), *Re-imagining political community: Studies in cosmopolitan democracy* (pp. 25, 219-222). Cambridge: Polity Press.

intercultural communication competence, and seeking the formulas to remove misunderstandings and breakdowns in intercultural communication. By contrast, American philosopher John Dewey takes a moral approach to define communication as individually distinctive members of a community sharing experiences, participating in joint activities, cooperating in free social inquiry and the distribution of its conclusions, transforming habits, and ultimately making life rich and varied in meanings. This Deweyan moralist perspective can be applied to situate intercultural communication studies in the context of a globalizing world where global democracy, though far from playing any noticeable role in regulating international relations at present, should ultimately rule if humankind is to have a future and continue to thrive. Unlike the leading theorists of global democracy who define it as mostly a decision-making mechanism among nation-states of the world, this paper stresses, from a Deweyan perspective, the construction of a global public in a democratic global community as the foundation or precondition of global democracy. And this is where intercultural communication, understood not only as practical means to satisfy immediate individual, organizational and national needs in intercultural contexts, but also as consummate ends or an intercultural democratic way of life, could make its unique contribution.

What follows is a redefinition from a Deweyan perspective of intercultural communication in the context of a globalizing world where democracy is pursued as an ultimate good.

1) Intercultural Communication Is a Transactional Process of Knowing Involving Individuals and Groups of Different Cultural Backgrounds

Epistemologically, intercultural communication can be understood as a distinctive method of knowing that requires the cooperation among individuals and groups of different cultural backgrounds. Stressing the “transactional” nature of communication, Dewey (1949-1952) writes, “The transactional is in fact that point of view which systematically proceeds upon the ground that knowing is cooperative and as such is integral with communication” (p. 4). Put in an intercultural context, this statement means that the involved parties of intercultural communication should respect each other as unique and equal partners undertaking a common cause of inquiry into problems concerning their common interests. It also means valuing the unique contribution each party might make to the process of inquiry. And for that reason, intercultural communication that is transactional requires the involved parties to be ready to “give and take” in the reciprocal exchanging of information and views.

In addition, the transactional nature of communication prescribes the cooperative knowing as an open-ended process. Dewey (1949-1952) argues,

By its own processes it is allied with the postulational. It demands that statements be made as descriptions of events in terms of durations in time and areas in space. It excludes assertions of fixity and attempts to impose them. It installs openness and flexibility in the very process of knowing. It treats knowledge as itself inquiry—as a goal within inquiry, not as a terminus outside or beyond inquiry. (p. 5)

Following this principle of “openness” and “flexibility” would help rid intercultural communication of ethnocentrism, absolutism and fundamentalism that often reduce

intercultural communication into intercultural confrontation and antagonism. When intercultural communication becomes transactional, global problems of any kind blocking the way of global democracy can be investigated cooperatively and experimentally by individuals and groups of different cultural backgrounds so that rich resources of the world's myriad of cultures are pooled together and exploited to the fullest extent and various possible solutions are tried experimentally and conditions are ameliorated gradually.

2) Intercultural Communication Transforms the Hardened Habits of Individuals and Groups of Different Cultural Backgrounds, Ultimately Generating One Dynamic Heterogeneous World Culture

As individuals learn to adapt to their environment, they form habits. The habits thus formed may set a limit on their further learning, preconditioning what to learn as well as how to learn. This, however, happens only when individuals are isolated from communicating with one another, resulting in "a non-communicating habit" (Dewey, 1925b, p. 215). According to Dewey, "Communication not only increases the number and variety of habits, but tends to link them subtly together, and eventually to subject habit-forming in a particular case to the habit of recognizing that new modes of association will exact a new use of it. Thus habit is formed in view of possible future changes and does not harden so readily" (1925b, p. 214).

It is the same case with culture. When cultures are isolated and prevented from communicating with one another, they tend to ossify. By contrast, intercultural communication creates opportunities for various cultures to interact with and learn from each other, expanding the horizons of individual cultures and introducing novel cultural resources for cultural reconstruction and innovation. The increasing frequency of individual cultures interacting with each other accelerated by globalization will gradually lead to one cohesive world culture that is at the same time heterogeneous and dynamic.

3) Intercultural Communication Contributes to the Forming of a Global Democratic Community Where Sharing and Participation Are Made Possible for Individuals and Groups of Different Cultural Backgrounds

Throughout his life from late 19th century to the middle of the 20th century, Dewey (1946) was never satisfied with the existing American democracy model consisting of two major parties competing against each other. He argues,

[D]emocracy is much broader than a special political form.... It is... a way of life, social and individual. The keynote of democracy as a way of life may be expressed... as the necessity for the participation of every mature human being in formation of the values that regulate the living of men together: which is necessary from the standpoint of both the general social welfare and the full development of human beings as individuals. (p. 57)

To be more particular, Dewey (1916) upholds two criteria to measure democracy:

The two elements in our criterion both point to democracy. The first signifies not only more numerous and more varied points of shared common interest, but greater reliance upon the recognition of mutual interests as a factor in social control. The second means not only freer interaction between social groups ... but change in social habit – its continuous readjustment through meeting the new situations produced by varied intercourse. And these two traits are precisely what characterize the democratically constituted society. (p. 101)

For Dewey, the most secure foundation of democracy is a democratic community in which social inquiry is cooperatively conducted, its conclusions freely distributed, and social institutions flexibly readjusted accordingly.

But how to bring about such a democratic community? Dewey (1925-1927a) writes, “Communication can alone create a great community. Our Babel is not one of tongues but of the signs and symbols without which shared experience is impossible” (p. 324). For one thing, communication enables individuals to share experiences and recognize common interests; for another, as Dewey (1920) put it, “Communication, sharing, joint participation are the only actual ways of universalizing the moral law and end” (p. 197). Through communication, Dewey believes, a self-conscious public is formed that would devote itself to the constant amelioration of the democratic community.

This is also true of global democracy. As some theorists point out, cosmopolitan citizens with a shared set of global values and due recognition of common global interests have to be present so that global democracy could function. The most effective way of creating such cosmopolitan identities lies in, most probably, the creation and expansion of a global public sphere or a global civil society where free communication among the global public or world citizens across cultures is guaranteed. As Dewey (1925-1927b) writes, “[Democracy] will have its consummation when free social inquiry is indissolubly wedded to the art of full and moving communication” (p. 350). The growing numbers of well-organized international conferences are good examples of such communicating communities. Other examples include nongovernmental organizations or civil society groups organized for some global public purpose. To accelerate this trend, intercultural communication research and education in the universities worldwide plays an especially significant role in inculcating in the minds and hearts of future world citizens a human identity, “multiple citizenships” (Held, 2000, p. 30) and a core set of cosmopolitan norms, laying a solid foundation for global democracy.

4) Intercultural Communication Is Both the Means and Ends of Global Democracy

If global democracy can be understood as a democratic community in which individuals and groups of various cultural backgrounds share interests, cooperate to solve the problems facing them, and enrich the meanings of each other’s life, then intercultural communication and its “congenial objects” are objects “ultimately worthy of awe, admiration, and loyal appreciation” (Dewey, 1925a, p. 159). Dewey (1925a) writes, “They are worthy as means, because they are the only means that make life rich and varied in meanings. They are worthy as ends, because in such ends man is lifted from his immediate isolation and shares in a communion of meanings”

(p. 159). In this sense, global democracy and democratic intercultural communication are interchangeable terms.

As such, global democracy is not to be achieved within a short period of time through undemocratic means that claim to be immediately effective. Dewey (1938-1939b) maintains, “[D]emocratic ends demand democratic methods for their realization. ... [D]emocracy can be served only by the slow day by day adoption and contagious diffusion in every phase of our common life of methods that are identical with the ends to be reached....” (p. 187) Global democracy is, therefore, an open-ended process in which intercultural communication is operated democratically on a daily basis.

5) Intercultural Communication through Mass Media Is Liable to Manipulation and Malfunction at the Expense of the Public Sphere

In the early years of mass production, Dewey was far-sighted to detect the potential negative impact of mass media. According to his observation, media technologies produced by modern science had multiplied the means of modifying the dispositions of the mass of the population, which, in conjunction with economic centralization, had enabled mass opinion to be mass-produced like physical goods (Dewey, 1938-1939a, p. 91). He further points out, “Aside from the fact that the press may distract with trivialities or be an agent of a faction, or be an instrument of inculcating ideas in support of the hidden interest of a group or class (all in the name of public interest), the wide-world present scene is such that individuals are overwhelmed and emotionally confused by publicized reverberation of isolated events” (Dewey, 1938-1939a, p. 92). With the evolution of mass communication expanding into every corner of the globe today, all these problems of media manipulation and malfunction that Dewey was concerned about have worsened rather than disappeared. In the globalization context, international mass media have more often than not hindered the constructive communication between different cultures.

To offset the negative effects of mass communication, Dewey advocates a return to face-to-face communication. He writes, “Vital and thorough attachments are bred only in the intimacy of an intercourse which is of necessity restricted in range. . . .” (Dewey, 1925-1927c, pp. 367-368) He believes that “[d]emocracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community” (Dewey, 1925-1927c, pp. 367-368). Unfortunately, Dewey did not live to see the birth of various kinds of new media that have the potential to increase the opportunity of “face-to-face” communication in the “virtual neighborhood.” It remains a question how we can use mass media, old and new, intelligently to better promote intercultural communication and global democracy.

In conclusion, this paper has attempted to formulate a Deweyan normative version of intercultural communication conducive to the growth of global democracy. Skeptics of global democracy might simply deride it as utopian, but I share Marchetti’s (2008) not entirely unfounded optimism:

[G]lobal democracy is no more unrealistic today than national democracy was 200 years ago, or women’s enfranchisement fifty years ago, or blacks voting in the US

south just a few decades ago, or the end of the apartheid system in South Africa even more recently, if we assume the correct normative perspective. (p. 174)

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