

Multicultural crews and the culture of globalization

G. Benton

The California Maritime Academy, USA

Abstract

Economic and geo-political forces have created the conditions through which the maritime industry has assumed its current profoundly internationalist character. Therefore, much work has been done to address the problems that arise from multilingual and multiethnic crew compositions, primarily in regards to communication and the emergent significance of Maritime English as a field of study. Less emphasis, however, has been given to “cultural literacy” and the importance of understanding culturally-motivated interpersonal dynamics as they may impinge upon shipboard operations. Potential conflicts that may surface because of multicultural crews extend beyond issues of safety due to communication barriers, to issues of maritime security, cohesion among crew members, damage to morale, and perceptions of leadership support. This paper seeks to identify problems that may arise, and to suggest what can be done from the vantage point of the maritime university. It could be argued that a solution cannot arise from a simplistic mandate to “tolerate” other customs and cultural practices, but rather to embed knowledge of cultural difference in the maritime classroom, thus making the study of the cultures of globalization a core component of the maritime curriculum. Of the many obstacles facing the 21st-century mariner, among them will be the need to manage cultural differences between crew members. The educated mariner will need to be able to understand the similarities and differences among people and to develop the capacities to solve problems. This could be accomplished through the implementation of a general education program that emphasizes critical thinking skills and knowledge about diversity and trans-cultural interactions. Finally, the question of globalization and cultural difference is not only a concern of the maritime community. In a world engaged with global affairs in regards to trade, national security, the environment, health, and justice, issues of multiculturalism impact many aspects of many trans-national operations. This paper will conclude with the suggestion that it is possible to turn the object of inquiry inside out. Through an analysis of the way the maritime industry deals (both successfully and unsuccessfully) with such issues, the study of shipboard life might prove useful to social scientists and scholars of globalization.

Keywords: culture, multiculturalism, globalization, maritime education, curriculum reform.

1 Introduction

Economic and geo-political forces have, for some time now, created the conditions through which the maritime industry has assumed its current profoundly internationalist character. As noted by Trenker and Cole, “over the past 25 years or so, 80% of the world’s merchant ships have become multilingual and multiethnic in crew composition” [1]. Furthermore, according to Badawi and Halawa “one in ten ships operates with crews composed of five or more nationalities” [2]. Much excellent work has been done to address the problems that arise from such heterogeneity, primarily in regards to communication and the emergent significance of Maritime English as a field of study. However, less emphasis has been given to “cultural literacy” and the importance of understanding culturally-motivated interpersonal dynamics, as they may impinge upon shipboard operations.

The text of the STCW Resolution 22 of 1978 is taken as a starting point. This calls for an emphasis on “the importance to safety of good human relationships between seafarers on board.” Certainly safety is the foundational concern of all maritime operations. What is more ambiguous in the resolution, however, is what exactly constitutes “good human relationships”. How are these fostered, especially between seafarers of different backgrounds, ethnicities, and nationalities? Bracketing momentarily the issue of effective communication via a standardized Maritime English platform, what *cultural* differences may impede good human relationships, and what might be done to prevent or minimize these impediments? Potential conflicts that may surface because of multicultural crews reach beyond issues of safety due to communication barriers, and extend to issues of maritime security, cohesion among crew members, damage to morale, and perceptions of leadership support. This paper seeks to identify problems that may arise, and to suggest what can be done from the vantage point of the maritime university. It could be argued that a solution cannot arise from a simplistic mandate to “tolerate” other customs and cultural practices (or worse, to just ignore them), but rather to embed knowledge of cultural difference in the maritime classroom, thus making the study of the cultures of globalization a core component of the maritime curriculum.

2 The culture of globalization and the globalization of culture

Culture, in its broadest sense, is “the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group that encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs” [3]. In addition, culture gives people a “sense of who they are, of belonging, of how they should behave, and of what they should be doing.” [4]. Although, there are many disagreements between various factions of cultural theorists, generally speaking, when cultures are isolated and homogeneous, the societies they engender are relatively stable, because there are clearly delineated roles and behavioural expectations of all participants. When cultures collide and combine the potential for social and political destabilization

increases. There have always been contact zones between disparate cultures, of course, but this has dramatically accelerated in the present era of globalization. This is marked by “the inexorable integration of markets, nation-states and technologies to a degree never witnessed before – in a way that is enabling individuals, corporations and nation-states to reach around the world farther, faster, deeper and cheaper than ever before... This process of globalization is also producing a powerful backlash from those brutalized or left behind by this new system” [5]. If globalization is the preferred term given to describe the current historical moment, which is characterized by an accelerated movement of goods and services and people across the globe that began to fully take shape in the 1970s (a decade, not coincidentally, that saw the international institutionalization of STCW regulations), globalization also, then, impacts the formation and dissemination of “culture”. For John Tomlinson, “culture has long had connotations tying it to the idea of a fixed locality. The idea of ‘a culture’ implicitly connects meaning construction with particularity and location” [6]. In addition, as John Clifford writes, “Dwelling was understood to be the local ground of collective life, travel a supplement; roots always precede routes” [7].

Herein lies the crux: culture is generally assigned a fixed, local particularity, therefore globalization, with its complex tendrils of connectivity, weakens the ties of culture to place. Different cultures are being introduced to one another on a scale never seen before (the globalization of cultures); conversely, this internationalism and cosmopolitanism produces a new culture of hybridity and heterogeneity (the culture of globalization). The potential tensions within this dialectic are worth exploring, particularly within the narrower objectives of maritime education and training.

3 Complexities of cultural heterogeneity

Seafarers have traditionally been vehicles by which culture is transmitted and transmogrified across space, but now it is the ship itself which may be the site of complex cultural exchanges and negotiations. There is, of course, a long and colourful history of the use of multicultural crews on ocean-going vessels, and if one is to believe the nineteenth-century American novelist Herman Melville, this cultural heterogeneity is what makes the seafaring life so vibrant and fulfilling. Yet, if indigenous culture gives people a sense of identity, it also “impacts behaviour, morale, and productivity at work as well, and includes values and patterns that influence company attitudes and actions” [8]. On a macro political level, Samuel Huntington has written that perhaps “the fundamental source of human conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be culture...Global politics is being reconfigured along cultural lines. Peoples and countries with similar cultures are coming together, peoples and countries with different cultures are coming apart” [9].

These conflicts may be evident on a micro level as well, as evidenced by the findings of maritime scholars Badawi and Halawa. In their paper “The Problem

of Cross Cultural and Multilingual Crews,” they note that “an individual’s cultural background can affect his communicative skills as well as his learning potential and capabilities” [10]. The central purpose of their work is to enlarge the concepts of communication to include not just the vocabulary and grammar of a language, but the *social* aspects of communication as well, including the context of an utterance, the speed of a delivery, and the nuances of body language. Added to this could be the communicative barriers put in place by cultural differences (i.e., in regards to the collectivist culture of Asian countries vs. the more individualistic cultures of Western countries), but also in relation to different but integrated beliefs and values, that can be organized via anthropological typologies: kinship systems, religious systems, ethics systems, political systems, health systems, and recreational systems.

Before it is possible to structure courses and contextualize the instruction of heterogeneous cultures of globalization, it is important to acknowledge that the term “multiculturalism” itself is freighted with complications, and this concept revolves around two important but antithetical positions. On the one hand, the teaching of cultural differences may embrace a particularistic vision that stresses the affiliations with one’s local culture – a type of ethnocentrism or ethnic loyalty that often works to build group solidarity. On the other hand, the teaching of cultural differences may stress the unificatory nature of globalization under the title “cosmopolitanism” – from the Greek language, to be a citizen of the world, a member of humanity as a whole. According to E.D. Hirsh, “the issue about multiculturalism that we need to decide is this: Do we define ourselves as belonging to a particular ‘ethnos’ or do we define ourselves as belonging to a broad ‘cosmopolis’? ... It is possible, of course, to hold a kind of dual citizenship, to be part of both one’s particular ethnos and the larger cosmopolis” [11]. The difficulty begins only when one asserts the mutual exclusivity of one over the other, and this is precisely the difficulty that might impact shipboard relations as indeed it might impact any trans-national or multinational workplace.

How then is it possible to recognize, understand, tolerate and even celebrate cultural diversity, while simultaneously espousing a cosmopolitan stance that ensures the polyglot community works smoothly and efficiently toward a common goal? An answer may be found in the work of James Banks, who argues a new kind of citizenship is needed for the twenty-first century. He describes a multicultural citizenship which recognizes and legitimizes the rights and needs of citizens to maintain commitments to their cultural communities and to the national and global civic cultures [12].

While much of the cross-cultural negotiations must inevitably be sorted out from within the experiential arena of the workplace, much valuable information can be, and should be, acquired in the classroom. Luo Weihua makes this very clear: “Globalization directly influences maritime industry needs and in turn has immediate impact on Maritime Education and Training. The process of globalization dictates higher requests to a level of knowledge of languages and [the] skill[s] to apply it. The knowledge of vocabulary is not sufficient to work

in multinational crew[s]. Globalization of the shipping industry ... demand[s] a high level of education, training, and certification of seafarers” [13].

4 General Education, the Maritime University, and the 21st-century mariner

Of the many obstacles facing the 21st century mariner, among them will be the need to manage cultural differences between crew members. The educated mariner will need to be able to understand the similarities and differences among people, and to develop the capacities to solve problems that arise precisely from these differences. It is relatively easy to simply call for modifications in academic curricula. However, it is much more difficult to implement such changes because of several mitigating factors. One of the first hurdles to overcome is to find a place within educational models for cross-cultural analyses and the study of the cultures of globalization.

At The California Maritime Academy cadets are required to take courses designed to educate them in multiple cultures, and the Academy is moving even further in this direction through the strengthening of a general education program. “General Education”, a term widely used in traditional American universities, is designed to provide knowledge, skills, experiences, and perspectives which enable students to make connections among disciplines, and expand their capacities to take part in a wide range of human interests and activities, as well as confront the personal, moral, and social problems that are an inevitable part of human life. This programme goes beyond rudimentary instruction in basic skill sets to emphasize, in the words of Jerry Graff, “knowledge of history and culture and of science and mathematics; skills such as logical and critical thinking and communication; and knowledge about diversity and intercultural skills” [14].

California Maritime Academy, as many other maritime universities, offers a curriculum and faculty that challenge students to attain intellectual achievements. Its academic departments, with their programmes of majors and minors, are primarily responsible for developing the highly detailed and specialized skills and knowledge called for in today’s world. In order to be a learned, successful, and valuable participant in the rapidly changing global community, students need more than a professional or vocational training. Courses required for a major may prepare the student for a vocation, while general education programmes help students see the place of their specialized knowledge in their total education by demonstrating that knowledge is not isolated, there is always more to learn, and the project of education is a lifelong commitment.

Granted, the call to expand the maritime-based curriculum in such a way faces many internal and external challenges, including financial expenditures, availability of qualified instructors, and the integration of additional courses into traditionally unit-heavy fields of study, but the benefits are significant and long reaching. There are many who feel that a general education program is impractical, irrelevant, or unnecessary, and that only the major or professional preparation is of value. However, as argued by Ernest Boyer, “rather than divide

the undergraduate experience into separate camps, general versus specialized education, the curriculum of a college of quality will bring the two together” [15]. Complex learning outcomes therefore, must be developed across the curriculum in order to integrate, both vertically and horizontally, specialized and general knowledge.

A statement released last year by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) called on its member institutions to focus on five valued sets of educational outcomes and to concentrate on assessing them. The outcomes are: (1) analytical, communication, quantitative, and information processing skills; (2) understanding inquiry practices of the natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, and arts; (3) intercultural knowledge and collaborative problem-solving skills; (4) proactive sense of responsibility for individual, civic, and social choices; and (5) habits of minds that foster integrative thinking and the ability to transfer knowledge and skills from one setting to another [16]. It is the third set which resonates with the concerns of this paper, and it is important to note that the AACU explicitly links “intercultural knowledge with ‘problem-solving skills’”, the latter term of which has been highly valued in Maritime Education.

Indeed, the study of intercultural knowledge may even be considered a meta-framework with the potential for integration across curricula, precisely because it is so oriented toward problem-solving skills. The “problem” of cross-cultural exchanges itself can be foregrounded in order to teach leadership skills, crisis management, and group dynamics. A foundation of “multicultural literacy” (the ability to identify, recognize, and interpret multiple cultural manifestations) helps to produce an educated citizen of the twenty-first century, a citizen who is able to develop a delicate balance of cultural, national, and global identifications.

5 Conclusion

Ultimately, the issue of globalization and cultural difference is one that transcends that of the maritime community. In a world engaged with global affairs in regards to trade, national security, the environment, health, and justice, issues of multiculturalism impact many aspects of many trans-national operations. The deepening ethnic texture of nations such as the United States, Canada, Australia, Germany, the United Kingdom and Japan make the study of multiculturalism an imperative. The vast amount of material produced by, and used in, business administration departments, points to the importance of understanding cultural differences in order to effectively manage and provide leadership. Even the American National Aeronautics and Space Administration, concerned about Shuttle/Mir Space Station multicultural crews, conducted a 4 1/2 year psychosocial study to provide quantitative data on interpersonal relationships. Their findings suggest strategies that should help build stronger, more productive working relationships among crew members and among people of different cultural backgrounds [17].

Cutting-edge theorists of cultural formations like David Hawk of the New Jersey Institute of Technology and Satu Teerikangus of Helsinki University of

Technology, even propose to reorganize conceptions of culture in order to “renegotiate human futures”. “A key characteristic of a culture of the future,” they write, “is that it can help a social group effectively respond to change by learning to embrace, then create it. In this way culture turns from being a by-product of core, historic values, and becomes a vehicle for design of the values that better match the challenges of the 21st century” [18]. Their work suggests that culture, and the collision of cultures that are experienced today, can be realigned such that, the energies harnessed from such an integration, may transform the political and economic landscape of the world.

Those who work and do research in maritime universities, therefore, are in an exciting position when confronted with the challenges posed by the culture of globalization. On the one hand, it is important to make use of the scholarship that is being produced in academic fields such as international business, sociology, political science, global studies, and cultural studies, and apply it to maritime majors. On the other hand, the very existence of multicultural crews provides a ready-made laboratory to study the effects of multiculturalism and to disseminate that information to others. In other words, it is possible to turn the object of inquiry inside out. Through an analysis of the way the maritime industry deals (both successfully and unsuccessfully) with such issues, the study of shipboard life might prove useful to social scientists and scholars of globalization. This process can be fostered by the free and frank exchange of ideas between academics and industrialists, and by intensifying efforts to exchange students from one maritime university to another, to make the environment these students learn in as richly diverse as the world they will soon enter.

References

- [1] Trenkner, P., Cole, C. Profiling the maritime English instructor. *Proc. of the 4th General Assembly of the International Association of Maritime Universities*. Alexandria, Egypt. CD-ROM 2003.
- [2] Badawi, E. El Sayed A., Halawa, A. M.: Maritime communication: the problem of cross cultural and multilingual crews. *Proc. of the 4th General Assembly of the International Association of Maritime Universities*. Alexandria, Egypt. CD-ROM 2003.
- [3] United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity website. http://www.unesco.org/education/imld_2002/universal_decla.shtml 2002.
- [4] Harris, P. R., Moran, R. T. *Managing Cultural Differences*, Gulf Publishing: Houston, Texas, pp. 4-5, 2000.
- [5] Friedman, T. L. *The Lexus and the olive tree: understanding globalization*. Random House, New York, p. 9, 2000.
- [6] Tomlinson, J. *Globalization and culture*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, pp. 27-29, 1999.
- [7] Clifford, J. *Routes: travel and translation in the late twentieth century*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, p. 3, 1997.

- [8] op. cit. [4].
- [9] Huntington, S., *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order*. Simon and Shuster, New York, 1996.
- [10] op. cit. [2]
- [11] Hirsch, E.D. Toward a centrist curriculum: two kinds of multiculturalism in elementary school. The Core Knowledge Foundation. <http://www.coreknowledge.org>.
- [12] Banks, J. Teaching for multicultural literacy, global citizenship, and social justice. Cultures in Counterpoint. Charles Fowler Colloquium. 2003 <http://lib.umd.edu/PAL/SCPA/fowlercolloq2003bankspaper.html>.
- [13] Luo, W. Maritime English Education in the context of globalization. ESP in Multilingual and Multicultural Contexts. <http://home.planet.nl/~kluij016/11WeihuaDAG2.htm>.
- [14] Graff, J. What is a Generally Education Person? Association of American Colleges and Universities. *Peer Review* <http://www.aacu.org/peerreview/previous.cfm> 2004.
- [15] Boyer, E. *College: the undergraduate experience in America*. HarperCollins: New York, 1988.
- [16] op. cit. [14].
- [17] Psychosocial effects of long-duration space flight analyzed in shuttle/Mir studies. *Space Life Science Research Highlights*. Office of Biological and Physical Research, National Aeronautics and Space Administration <http://spaceresearch.nasa.gov> 2000.
- [18] Hawk, D., Teerikangas, S. Negotiating with our future cultures. *Proc. of the 45th Annual Meeting of the International Society for the Systems Sciences*. Asilomar, California <http://www.iss.org> 2001.