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Never Mind?

Mindfulness and Competent Intercultural Interaction

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Abstract

The ultimate goal of intercultural communication research and education has been or should be to have successful intercultural interactions and build productive intercultural relationships. A close examination of 42 pairs of email exchanges between college students in the U.S. and China during spring 2011 shows how mindfulness shapes positively intercultural interactions. It describes three manifestations of mindfulness, five salient features of mindful intercultural email interaction, and three functions of mindfulness in intercultural interaction. The implications, limitations, and directions for future research are also discussed.

Keywords: *mindfulness, intercultural interaction, email exchanges, international pen pal, China, the US*

Introduction

The ultimate goal of intercultural communication research and education has been or should be to have successful intercultural interactions and build productive intercultural relationships. Theories and research on intercultural communication competence (ICC) (e.g., Gudykunst 1993, 1995, 2005; Imahori & Cupach 2005; Wiseman 2003; Spitzberg & Cupach 1984; Ting-Toomey 2005) show that mindfulness is the determining factor for successful intercultural interaction. However, no due attention has been given to empirically researching mindfulness in intercultural communication, though it has been theorized or hypothesized (Devine 1989; Langer 1989; Gudykunst, 2005). This study, hence, tries to investigate how mindfulness shapes intercultural interaction through an analysis of email exchanges between 42 pairs of college students in China and the U.S. who participated in an international pen pal project during the spring semester of 2011.

Mindfulness in Intercultural Communication: A Review of Literature

This section addresses the question: In what sense is mindfulness an issue in intercultural communication? Langer (1989) defines mindfulness as involving creating new categories of information, being open to new information, and being aware of more than one perspective. Shafir (2009) defines mindfulness as involving both mind and body in the moment of communication. Mindful listening requires one to be attentive or fully concentrate, remember what was said, take in all cues to comprehend accurately, and to be aware of the other's perspective. Mindfulness means being in the presence, here and now. What is more, mindfulness entails the management of one's reactions when his or her negative stereotypes are triggered in order not to respond in a negative or prejudiced way (Devine 1989). Three defining qualities emerge from the various definitions of mindfulness, that is, awareness (e.g., of perspectives, information), involvement, and interaction management.

Mindfulness has been theorized or hypothesized as a significant issue for competent intercultural communication. It is singled out as a major factor in the Anxiety-Uncertainty Management theory that enables communicators to appropriately and effectively engage in information sharing and seeking in order to reduce uncertainty/anxiety to an optimal level. Gudykunst (2005) hypothesized that mindfulness leads to better information comprehension. It will reduce predictive uncertainty as it enables us to make more specific and personalized predictions of the other's behaviors. It will also help reduce anxiety as we will be more open to new information instead of relying on presumptions or stereotypes.

Mindfulness is implied as the determining factor for successful intercultural communication in some other theories, though it is not mentioned specifically. In the most recent version of Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) theory, Pearce (2005) highlighted two essential conditions for successful intercultural interaction: 1) awareness of the other's cultural meaning system and willingness to coordinate and 2) awareness of one's own cultural system and not allowing it to dictate one's behaviors. Moreover, awareness of each other's identity needs is identified as a key element for competent intercultural interaction by the Identity Management theory (IMT) (Imahori & Cupach 2005). According to IMT, individuals have three levels of identities—personal, relational, and communal (Hall 2003)—and they prefer different levels of identities at different points of social interaction. Competent intercultural interaction requires individuals to be mindful of each other's identity needs and successfully negotiate/construct mutually acceptable identities (Cupach & Imahori 1993). Successful intercultural interaction from the perspective of the IMT is characterized with synchrony in identity construction.

Along similar lines, Face Negotiation Theory (Ting-Toomey 2005) contends that awareness of each other's face needs and meeting those needs is key to successful intercultural interaction. Individuals have five major types of face needs, namely, autonomy face, inclusion face, status face, reliability face, competence face, and moral face. Due to individual and cultural differences, people have different face needs at different moments and value different kinds of face. One major source of intercultural conflicts revolves around issues of identity confirmation-rejection, respect-disrespect, and approval-disapproval of the individuals in interaction. Thus, being mindful of each other's face needs and meeting those needs helps circumvent conflicts caused by unmet identity-based goals.

What is more, mindfulness is at the root of three defining components of ICC (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984), namely, knowledge, motivation, and skills. Communicators need to be aware of the other culture (Wiseman, Hammer, & Nishida 1989) and self (Gudykunst, Young, & Nishida 1987). They need to have intercultural sensitivity and empathy towards others (Chen & Starosta 1998; Gudykunst & Hammer 1988; Randolph, Landis, & Tzeng 1977). Furthermore, they need to recognize nonverbal messages, self-disclose appropriately, effectively manage interaction, being flexible, showing proper respect, and so on (Anderson 1994; Cegala 1984; Gudykunst 1992; Li 1999; Ting-Toomey 1994). Without mindfulness, it is virtually impossible to be competent in intercultural interaction.

Therefore, mindfulness constitutes an important issue in intercultural communication, though its significance has been unduly neglected in the literature due to the fact that it is mostly implied rather than explicitly or specifically discussed or researched as indicated above. As a result, little empirical research has been conducted on mindfulness. Thus, much research is warranted to shed light on the significant role mindfulness plays in intercultural communication. Driven by this goal, this current study tries to explore exactly how mindfulness shapes intercultural interaction through investigating the following questions:

RQ1: What are the manifestations of mindfulness in intercultural interaction?

RQ2: How are mindful intercultural interaction patterned?

RQ3: How does mindfulness function in intercultural interaction?

Meeting Online across the Ocean: An International Pen Pal Project

In spring 2011, college students from two universities across the ocean in North China and South Texas in the U.S. were given an opportunity to interact with each other through email. A total of 84 students ($n = 84$) who were enrolled in the intercultural communication class on both ends were assigned into pairs to communicate with each other as part of the course requirement. The project started at the end of February and lasted till the end of April[1].

The course instructors at both universities coordinated the process and used the same project guide prepared by the instructor on the U.S. side. U. S. students were instructed to initiate the interaction by emailing their pen pal in China, though not all students did as expected. Students were not provided a script to be used in initiating email contact in order to encourage students to create natural and spontaneous interactions between each other. At the end of the semester, students were asked to turn in their email exchanges for research purposes. Students were informed of this from the onset.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

A total of 42 sets of email exchanges were collected. The instructors compared and contrasted the email exchanges that were turned in by students on their side and sent each other emails that were missing from their respective data set. In the end, complete email exchanges were obtained and were used as data for analysis. The entire data set for this study consists of over 300 pages of email exchanges. They uploaded onto Atlas ti.6.2, a qualitative data analysis software. To maintain confidentiality, all personal ID information or names were removed. Each set of email exchanges was number coded from P1/U1 to P42/U42.

To analyze the data, I first read through all email exchanges to get an overview of the entire data set. Then, I analyzed individual email exchanges and coded the texts. Two types of codes were utilized, namely, open coding (researcher's codes) and code *in vivo* (native codes). In the process of coding, memos were created. Whereas some memos were attached to particular email texts, others were free memos. In the memos, I recorded my thoughts, comments, and questions about the data, ideas about a research topic, or summaries of email exchanges. The memos were useful in helping me formulate research ideas. Below are two examples:

Memo Example 1 (a free memo)

Contextuality

I noticed that in those impersonal email exchanges or not successful interactions, the participants seemed oblivious of what was happening around them in the larger context. All the successful exchanges were actually driven or shaped by the large contexts--social, cultural, political, international, and natural events happening at the time, and they shared their viewpoints or thoughts about the events. In those lean impersonal email exchanges no such contexts seemed to be influencing their interactions. What does that tell? Unsuccessful interactions are caused by mindlessness, showing a lack of interest in life or each other, a lack of commitment.

Another feature of the unsuccessful interactions is the absence of emoticons, or passionate or enthusiastic tone that characterizes the successful ones. The unsuccessful ones read dull, uninteresting, matter of fact, task-driven whereas the successful ones are full of life, interesting, personal.

Memo Example 2 (an attached memo)

Contextual factors

What makes the email exchange a learning process for the participants is the real life events that shape the interaction. Several events happened in the semester that were brought up by participants and constitute part of their interaction: Chinese tomb-sweeping day, Japanese Tsunami, Tiger Mom book, and so on. This learning is contextualized rather than isolated as in the classroom.

With the large number of codes, I classified them into groups on the basis of their semantic relationships (Spradley, 1980) such as types (e.g., relationships, events), examples (e.g., of similarities, differences, mindfulness), methods (e.g., of eliciting a response from partner, sharing information), reasons (e.g., for delayed responses, successful interaction), and so on. Finally, themes emerged from the categories of codes as they will be described next.

Manifestations of Mindfulness

Participants manifested their mindfulness in three major ways, namely, being mindful of a) self b) the other and c) the environment/contexts.

Mindful of self

One way communicators/participants manifested their mindfulness was their awareness of who they are, their perspectives, and their limitations. This falls into the knowledge component of ICC (Sptizberg & Cupach 1984). Being aware of their cultural identities and their culturally-situated perspectives, they were careful not to impose their biased views on their partners. They qualified their claims by using disclaimers or adopting a tentative or apologetic tone. Consequently, they sounded humble, courteous, understanding, and respectful. In the following example, the student demonstrates humility when she stated that her knowledge about Chinese culture was limited, which helped her prevent any negative perception of her from her Chinese partner, a preventive facework strategy (Ting-Toomey 2005):

Excerpt 1 (EEU10[2], on March 13, 2011, from the U.S. student)

On your last email, you asked me which I believed was better: a Chinese mother or American mother? I'm not sure how to answer this question because I have a limited amount of knowledge about Chinese parents.

The student in the following email was aware of cultural differences and how they might cause misunderstanding in their interaction, so she forestalls any misinterpretation by saying that if what she said happened to be offensive, it was out of ignorance rather than her intention:

Excerpt 2 (EEU11, on March 15, 2011, from the U.S. student)

I wanted to tell you before we talk any further, to please let me know if I offend you in any way. I apologize ahead of time in case I do. Just wanted to make it clear that those are not my intentions at all.

This student was mindful of the manner in which she was composing the email and of how it might make her partner think that she was being disrespectful, so she added a pre-apology at the end of the letter, “I apologize for my messy letter...”

Mindful of the other

A second way communicators/participants manifested their mindfulness was awareness of their partner—their needs, feelings, emotions, and responses. Such qualities were demonstrated particularly when their partners failed to respond to their emails in a timely manner; that is, when conflicts occurred. For instance, in one pair, the Chinese student did not reply 10 days after the U.S. student sent her an email. The way the U.S. student handled the situation in her email showed her awareness of her partner’s face needs and feelings:

Excerpt 3 (EEU12, on April 3, 2011, from the U.S. student)

It is so nice to hear from you. I understand the demands of school and how busy student's schedules can get. How many classes are you taking? What is your favorite class? My friends and family don't always understand how stressful school can be and I am very careful to not hurt their feelings during my study times. They think that I am avoiding them or ignoring them, but I really just get wrapped up in school work and don't have time to stay in touch.

The U.S. student accepted her partner’s excuse for failing to respond by showing understanding. She did one step further to put her Chinese partner at ease through showing empathy. She shared her own experience of being mistaken as neglecting others due to her busy schedules. Through showing awareness of her partner’s face needs and feelings, the US student successfully managed the awkward situation and gained the trust of her Chinese partner who responded with thankfulness.

In the following example, the student showed awareness of the other through perspective-taking of her partner’s (Langer, 1989):

Excerpt 4 (EEP10, on March 17, 2011, from the Chinese student) (italicized added for emphasis)

In your last email, you asked me what Chinese people think about single mothers going to college. Is it encouraged or is being a single mother in China a taboo? This is a quite interesting and popular question in China.

Generally speaking, very very few single mothers would go to college or almost no single mother would do that. [5 lines omitted where the student described the traditional views on single mothers in China] From this aspect, single mothers are not encouraged. But single mothers are not a taboo in China.

*However, since China gradually blends into the world, more and more young people at my age can accept and understand single mothers. As far as I’m concerned, though I love children, I’m still unwilling to be a single mother at such a young age. In that case I have to look after the baby and go on my study and life would be very hard. I’d like to enjoy my single time. **But I’m quite appreciate single mothers like you. You can coordinate your study and family duties very well. That is what I admire.** I think single mothers going to college is a very sensible choice. As an old Chinese saying “It is never too old to learn.” Single mothers should be encouraged to go to college to receive higher education so that they can improve their social values and self-value. It's also good for their children.*

In think in the modern society, we advocate freedom, equality and democracy. We shouldn't discriminate single mothers, on the contrary, we ought to understand them and give them more help and encourage them to live a happy life. Even in China today, more people hold this idea. Single mother like you is great! Fighting!

The Chinese student in the above example answered the touchy and sensitive question her U.S. student posed, how single moms are viewed in China, appropriately and mindfully. Her labeling the question as “interesting and popular” shows her sensitivity to her audience who was a single mom of two girls and who was attending college. Knowing that her answer would matter directly to her listener who was highly involved in the issue, the student was cautious in her expressions. She separates herself from her parents and grandparents, who represent the traditional Chinese culture that disapprove single mothers, by stating that “more and more young people at my age can accept and understand single mothers,” and further, “I’m quite appreciate[sic] single mothers like you...” By saying this, she pays respect to her U.S. partner, satisfying her positive face want (Brown & Levinson 1987) or her inclusion face need (Ting-Toomey 2005). She also displays empathy and support in the end by advocating freedom and education for single mothers and encouraging her partner to fight.

Mindful of the environment

A third way communicators/participants manifest their mindfulness was awareness of what was happening in the larger contexts. Mindless communicators seemed oblivious of what was happening around them and their email texts were brief and uninteresting. Mindful communicators, on the other hand, paid attention to the outside world and what was happening around them, whether they were relational, social, cultural, political, environmental, or international events, and turned them into interesting topics of discussion or opportunities for cultural exploration. As a result, their email texts were rich in information and interesting. What is more, in doing so, they showed their interest in life and in each other. For example, spring break and Chinese Tombs Sweeping Day were mentioned in almost all the email exchanges. However, they were used merely by mindless communicators as an excuse for not responding to their partners whereas they became topics of discussion for mindful communicators.

Some examples of the topics derived from the contextual events are student life, family life, controversial topics like death, religion, single parents, political party, teen pregnancy, wedding rituals, funeral rituals, marriage proposal, marriage, parenting styles, natural disasters, social network (Facebook), one child policy, cultural stereotypes, weather pattern, geography, gender issues, and so on. Students engaged in heated discussions, shared their viewpoints and invited the other to share theirs, which made the intercultural interaction an exciting process of learning about self, the other, life, culture, and the world. These discussions helped to bring partners closer to each other, forming the intellectual basis of intimacy.

Patterns of Mindful Intercultural Email Interaction

Three types of intercultural relations emerge from an analysis of the data in terms of how mindfulness was manifested by participants: mutual mindlessness, one mindful and one mindless, and mutual mindfulness. When communicators/participants were mutually mindful, they produced a flow of email exchanges[3]. That is what I would call successful email interaction. A closer look at these successful email interactions brings forth the following features: a) rich information; b) open self disclosure; c) detailed Q&As; d) well coordinated exchange; and, e) extensive use of emoticons or symbols.

Rich information

As described above, mindful communicators/participants paid attention to their surroundings and pulled contextual events into their conversations to generate much discussion and sharing. Their emails contain rich information. This may be the most salient feature of mindful email interactions. Necessarily, the email texts

were long. About 50% of the participants wrote emails that contained more than 300 words per email. The average number of emails composed by participants was 10 totaling around 3000 words at an average of about 300 words per letter. Among them, one U.S. student wrote 23 emails that had a total of over 22,000 words, making the average length of his emails about 1000 words. His Chinese partner wrote 22 emails totaling over 13,500 words with an average of about 660 words per letter. In contrast, one pair of students wrote to each other only 4 emails totaling about 1000 words during the same period.

The contrast is apparent. Mindful communicators/participants shared with each other more information. Consequently, they learned more from each other. Knowledge gained from such extensive information sharing is of many kinds or areas including self knowledge, knowledge about the partner, knowledge of own culture and that of the partner's, knowledge about history, politics, philosophy, religion, international events, sports, geography, various disciplines (literature, language, communication studies, etc.), popular culture, and so on. It was a life enriching experience for mindful communicators. The example below is both typical in the sense that it exemplifies the rich information shared by mindful communicators and untypical because of its unusual length:

Excerpt 5 (EEU27, on March 6, 2011, from the U.S. student) (italicized added for emphasis)

*You asked me about the differences between British and American time patterns. I have no idea what the answer to your question is. The best I can do is note some of the **other differences between America and Great Britain that may be related**. For example, I know that Britain uses the metric system to make measurements, as opposed to the American imperial system. [6 lines omitted. The student described the different measurements and time expression in GB, the U.S.] It seems Mexico, having European heritage, also measures like the British. It was a source of confusion for me as well growing up. [8 lines omitted. The student shared his family background.] In America, a day off is often spent in front of a television, or purchasing things you probably don't need and will replace within a few months. That is American life, American culture. [10 lines omitted. The student commented on American life.] **No one individual is self-made**. Furthermore, would they want to be? There is a passage written by a man named **John Donne**. It expresses the way I feel when I think of how Americans extol their independence. [the poem was omitted here] In the last two lines, when he refers to the bell tolling, he is referring to a funeral. It was common practice in Donne's time to ring the church bell at a funeral. He is telling people that when they hear the bell toll they should not ask know for whom it tolls, they should not wonder who has died. **Donne believes that any death of any human diminishes humankind, therefore when someone dies a part of you dies with them. I agree with him.** [3 lines omitted. More comments on the poem.]*

*I apologize for my lengthy discourse on Donne and my opinions of American culture. I just wonder if you feel the way I feel. **We've learned that China is a collectivist culture. It is not unlike Mexico, where one is concerned with more than oneself. What do you think of independence? Of collectivism?*** [4 lines omitted. More questions asked.]

The student covered a number of topics in this letter: his perception of cultural differences between the U.S., Great Britain, and Mexico; his views on U.S. culture; John Donne's philosophical view on death; his curiosity about Chinese culture; his interest in his partner's viewpoints. He displayed characteristics of a mindful communicator by his involvement (Cegala 1984) in the email exchange project, his attention to his partner's questions, his awareness of who he is, his awareness of who his partner is, and his interest in philosophical issues.

Let us now see an example of what I would call mindless email interaction:

Excerpt 6 (EEU1, on March 28, 2011, from the U.S. student)

Yes I am so sorry that I have not replied, my spring break I spent it working extra hours. Yes I did get your last email, you have not offended me at all so dont worry its my fault. I am glad you emailed me though. The other reason I also have been busy is that I proposed to my Girlfriend and its been a little overwhelming speaking to family and friends about it. How are you? What have you been doing and did you all have a break? I promise that the replies and emails will come alot faster, and dont be scared to email me if I havent.

It is the entirety of the letter the student sent to his Chinese partner. In this short letter, the student apologized for his not responding and provided two reasons as excuses. He also reassured his partner that he was not offended in any way. His disclosure of his proposal to his girlfriend was meant as further excuse for his behavior. His questions were more a way of greeting than information seeking or sharing. The brevity of the message coupled with numerous typos conveys a careless, perfunctory, and mindless attitude. It sets in sharp contrast with the example of mindful interaction above.

Open self disclosure

Another salient feature of mindful email interaction is the breadth and depth of self disclosure. Mindful participants were more involved in the process, and they were more open and honest with their international partner. The kinds of personal information shared ranged from hobbies, likes/dislikes, favorite books, movies, to personal viewpoints on controversial issues such as one child policy, Syrian situation, teen pregnancy, single mom, to their personalities. One U.S. student wrote a long letter in which she shared her personal life involving the death of her mother, her relationship with her boyfriend, and her emotional struggles. Several female U.S. students narrated their problems with their boyfriends[4]. Chinese students, on the other hand, did not have much disclosure of their personal relationships. Instead, they were open with their viewpoints on controversial issues. The two email excerpts below illustrate my points:

Excerpt 7 (EE U14, on March 10, 2011, from the U.S. student)

I have a lot of memories of past teachers from elementary up to high school. [3 lines omitted. The student narrated her experience with her fourth grade English teacher.] A drill team is like a dance team. I love to dance. After fourth grade I never joined any other type of dance team. I now dance socially with friends when we go to the club and any other time that there is music playing. My roommate and I like to listen to music as we wash dishes and she gets annoyed by me because I keep dancing and singing. :P

I should tell you a little about my personality. People usually describe me as LOUD. :D [2 lines omitted. The student described her personality.] :). I am 5 feet and 8 inches tall and where I am from that is considered tall for a girl. [5 lines omitted where the student described her physical appearance.]

My childhood and even now revolved around sports. I have played many sports: basketball, volleyball, softball, tennis, dodge ball, beach volleyball, rock climbing(indoors), football, and powerlifting. I am very competitive when it comes to sports. I am always trying to get better. About an hour ago my friend asked me to join her softball team :).

The above excerpt was one portion of a much longer email in which the student described her childhood experience, her interaction with her roommate, her physical appearance, her love of sports, and more importantly, her self-concept and personality. The detailed and much in-depth self analysis shows her self-awareness. Such self-disclosure helped her gain trust from her partner who also did similar amount and depth

of self disclosure, which provided a solid foundation for the continued development of their relationship. They formed what I would say close relationship through the project.

In contrast, lack of self disclosure marks mindless intercultural interaction. The example below illustrates this:

Excerpt 8 (EEU1, on March 10, 2011, from the U.S. student)

Hello xxx, I am sorry that I haven't emailed you back it's been a busy weekend for me. I am from Texas, right now I am a part time student and a part time Teller at a bank. What I love to do is play sports right now my softball season started so I am a bit busy with that as well. I also love my Playstation 3, whenever I have down time I watch movies or play games on it. What about you what do you do for fun? How is school going for you?

This excerpt, which constitutes an entire email, was sent on the same day as the previous one, which means that they were at similar phase of the intercultural relationship. However, it differs sharply from the previous one not merely in terms of the length of the text, but more significantly, the depth of self disclosure. This student did more superficial self disclosure that did not allow his Chinese partner to know much about him. If the student in the previous example did a full-sized self portrait, this student did merely a rough sketch of his face.

Detailed Q&As

A third salient feature of mindful intercultural email interaction is that participants took the time to ponder over the project, examine the partner's emails carefully, and come up with meaningful and well-thought out questions. By the same token, they took the time and effort to think about their partners' questions, conduct necessary research, and provide as accurate and thorough answers to those questions. Sometimes students confessed that they did web searches or interviewed others for answers, and sometimes they did not say that, but the fact was betrayed by the thoroughness and specificity of their answers. The detailed questions and answers in the email exchanges evidenced the level and degree of commitment these students had to their partners and to the project. The Excerpt below provides a typical example of such:

Excerpt 9 (EEP10, on March 27, 2011, from the Chinese student)

I'm glad to discuss "feet bound" during the old days in China. In your last email, you've asked me a few questions about "feet bound", Chinese culture, traditions, and values. I will answer them one by one.

- 1. Foot binding doesn't means to find a suitable husband. Foot binding was a custom practiced on young girls and women for approximately one thousand years in China. There are 3 important reasons to have females feet bound. (9 lines omitted. The student explained in detail the three reasons)*
- 2. Information is true but it has been changed into "one-child policy" (from 1978 till now) in order to control the rapidly increasing population. China has the largest population in the world. Our country is too crowded. Thus the government issued "one-child policy". young people at my age are always the only child in our family.*
- 3. In feudal society, females were valued less than males. (6 lines omitted. The student explained gender values in China from a historical perspective.)*
- 4. In feudal society, females could not own property. As an old Chinese saying "A married daughter is just like water that has been poured out---she doesn't belong to her parents*

anymore.” But now, females have the right to own property in law, because female and male are equal in law.

The student in this example provided detailed, thorough, and in-depth answers to her U.S. partner’s questions. It shows that she took her partner’s questions seriously. She was able to correct some of her pen pal’s inaccurate understanding about the foot binding practice. It turned out that there was some erroneous information spread by her daughter’s teacher. This Chinese student was able to research and find the correct information and send it to her partner who relayed it to her daughter who in turn relayed it to her teacher.

Such detailed Q&As provided an excellent forum where mindful communicators explored and taught about cultures, corrected misunderstandings, and developed better understandings of each other. They also helped participants perceive both differences and similarities between themselves and their respective cultures and eliminate wrong stereotypes or prejudice. They are where humanity found its full manifestation. As one Chinese student participant rightly and insightfully remarked, “no race but human race.” The educational value of mindful interaction through detailed Q&As cannot be exaggerated.

Well coordinated interaction

A fourth salient feature of mindful intercultural email interaction is its excellent coordination. Mutually mindful communicators were able to strike up tacitly agreed-upon pace of interaction. They coordinated nicely with each other so that they were in synch. Their interaction was free of friction as normally caused by discordance due to perceived irresponsiveness. When both participants were mindful of unspoken rules of email interaction and mindful of each other’s needs, they did not need any explicit discussion or negotiation of rules of interaction such as how often or how quickly they should reply to each other. As a result, they were able to devote their time and space to substantive matters.

One common feature of the bumpy or unsuccessful email interactions was the lack of synchrony between participants in terms of rules of interaction due to one party’s mindlessness. Generally, mindless participants were careless about email etiquette or about showing respect for the other. So they neglected their partners by not replying for days after their partner had sent them an email. As a reaction, their partner had to send follow-up emails to check their availability or their wellbeing. One student participant brought up in her email the rule of interaction, “First, I want to know how often and what time we should contact[sic], and then I can make sure I can send message on time. OK?” (EEP12, on March 13, 2011, from the Chinese student). Her partner replied courteously that she would expect her to reply as often as she could. However, this student turned out to be mindless of the expectations. She was either days late in replying to an email or failing to respond to the messages, which created discordance in their interaction.

Extensive use of emoticons or symbols

A final salient feature of mindful intercultural email interaction is the presence of large amount and variety of emotional signs or symbols interspersing the text. These emoticons and symbols showed that the participants were fully enjoying the process of interaction; they were in the here and now. Moreover, these emoticons and symbols added a touch of liveliness to the messages. Of course, they also functioned as nonverbal cues illustrating, supporting, reinforcing, clarifying, or contradicting the verbal message, which all gave rise to more vivid and richer expressions. The following excerpt provides a typical example of what I am describing:

Excerpt 10 (EEP14, on March 14, 2011, from the Chinese student) (italicized and bolded added for emphasis)

*I love to dance!!! When I was in elementary and middle school, [2 lines omitted] no matter it’s about singing, dancing, painting or sports. **Haha**, I was so active in many activities. But I don’t know why as time went on, I would feel nervous when performing before a large number of*

people. That can't stop my love toward music. ☹_☹. What happened this afternoon was so much alike yours. **Haha**. I was washing clothes, singing at the same time. My friends were giggling at me while I still continue without noticing them. I took aerobic dance class this semester. I love it so much.

Oh, my personality. [4 lines omitted here. The student described her personality.] my high-pitch would be take advantage, haha. Of course, I only behave like this before my good friends. They can't bear my screaming. **O(☹_☹)O**

wow, that means you are 1.76 meters! No wonder you like basketball and baseball so much. I'm 1.67 which is 5.48 feet. [2 lines omitted here] Your boyfriend should at least more than 1.8 meters, haha. I dress casually, too. [2 lines omitted here] So whenever we go shopping, she would persuade me to buy some nice and formal clothes. ~~~~(>_<)~~~~

This student used a variety of icons and symbols in the letter to help express herself. She also used “haha” several times to indicate how she was feeling at the moment. Her message reads as a lively, pleasant, excited, and fast paced narrative due to these emoticons and symbols. They show that she was into the process of composing the message with full attention and enjoyment. They bring the message to life and help enliven intercultural interactions.

Functions of Mindfulness in Intercultural Interaction

My analysis of the data so far has revealed three manifestations of mindfulness and five salient features of mindful intercultural email interactions. Mindfulness was manifested by participants' awareness of themselves, of their partner, and of the environment. Mindful intercultural email interaction was characterized by rich information, open self disclosure, detailed Q&As, well-coordinated interaction, and extensive use of emoticons & symbols.

These salient features of mindful intercultural email interaction performed at least three major functions: keeping the interaction flowing; creating intimacy and a bond between participants; and salvaging endangered relationships. As the first two functions have been discussed in my analysis above, I will elaborate on the third function here.

As I mentioned earlier, there were three ways to classify the dyadic intercultural relationships based on the analysis of mindfulness in each partner's email exchanges. One type consists of mutually mindful participants. A second type consists of one mindful and one mindless participant. A third type consists of mutually mindless participants. My analysis shows me that as long as there is one party who is mindful in a relationship, the interaction can be salvaged or rescued through this one party's mindfulness. I will give one example from the data. In P1, the U.S. student demonstrated characteristics of mindlessness from the beginning of the interaction. He was slow to reply to emails and when he wrote, it was extremely brief. The Chinese student initiated the interaction by sending her partner an email on March 5, 2011. Her partner did not reply until March 10 with a brief note that mainly explained why he was late to reply. The Chinese student replied on the same day and in her letter she showed empathy by stating that she understood his situation since she was also very busy. Then she did not hear from her partner over a period of two weeks. So she sent out another email on March 28:

Excerpt 11 (EEP1, on March 28, 2011, from the Chinese student)

Hi xxx,
How are you? Long time no hear from you. Is everything fine with you? What are you busy with

these days? Examination? Softball ? or something else? How is your spring break going? I've been wandering [sic] if you receive the email I sent you before. If you don't, please let me know. I guess our intercultural communication project may come across some problems if we don't exchange our ideas.
I don't know if the way I express my opinions to you is acceptable. If I said anything that offended you, I'm really really sorry. I don't really mean to it.
Looking forward to your early reply. Best regards, xx

She showed concern by asking if everything was fine with her partner. At the same time, she used assertion by telling her partner that if he continued to neglect the emails, their project would be in trouble. She further demonstrated her mindfulness by adding that she might have said things offensive to him and apologized for such a possibility. Consequently, her message sounded calm, understanding, yet assertive. It was apparent that she did not allow her emotions to control her response.

Through her mindful response, she was able to salvage the endangered interaction as her partner replied immediately on that same day. Ever since then, their interaction took a positive turn; they emailed back and forth at about 2-day intervals till the end of the project.

Interculturality of Mindfulness

My analysis seems to suggest that mindfulness transcends cultures in that both US and Chinese students manifested mindfulness and shared patterns of mindful interactions. However, this does not deny the interculturality of mindfulness, which is demonstrated in at least two ways. One, US and Chinese students seemed to be mindful of different aspects of their interaction. For example, US students seemed to take special caution not to offend their Chinese partners by addressing them properly or asking not too personal question, which reflects the US cultural value of privacy and individual rights (Hall 2003). Chinese students, conversely, tended to show excessive thankfulness, apologies, or care/concern to their US partners, which enacts the Chinese cultural value of gratitude, hospitality, and helpfulness (Gao & Ting-Toomey 1998).

Two, US and Chinese national cultures constituted the content and context of mindful interactions. As described above, one important feature of mindful patterns of interaction was rich information. A look at the email messages reveals culture-specific topics such as one child policy, marriage proposal, national holidays, rituals, education systems, and so on. Such a feature may be alien to interactions between people from the same cultural backgrounds; cultural differences breed more and exciting information exchange. Similarly, another feature described above, detailed Q&As, may also be unique to intercultural interaction in that we are intrigued by things we do not know/understand rather than those we already know as is the case in intracultural interaction.

Implications, Limitations & Directions for Future Research

My study has significant implications for intercultural communication theory and education. It shows that the heart of intercultural communication competence is mindfulness. Other factors such as linguistic knowledge or skills, cultural knowledge, and so on can be subsumed under mindfulness. In my data, the most successful interactions were not necessarily between participants who could write beautiful or grammatically immaculate texts as most of them were nonnative English speakers. On the other hand, despite good knowledge or good linguistic skills, if a participant is mindless, he or she cannot expect to have successful interactions. My study also suggests that mindfulness requires communicators to manage their negative emotions such as anger, impatience, or aggressiveness when they are activated by their partners'

irresponsive or irresponsible behaviors so that they will respond positively. It shows that negative emotions or feelings are incompatible with mindfulness and are harmful for intercultural interaction.

Given this, intercultural education and training may focus on cultivating mindfulness in students/participants. One future direction for research may be developing such instructional and training programs. Some questions to consider may include how to help students/participants appreciate mindfulness, what activities or techniques can be useful for cultivating mindfulness in students/participants, and what are some potential barriers and concerns in carrying out such instructional and training programs.

This study has limitations, though. The findings are qualified due to these limitations. For one thing, participants were assigned into pairs and were “forced” to interact with each other; they were not voluntary participants. That renders the data less than natural or spontaneous, which might have affected the results. For another thing, the interaction was mediated through email rather than FTF interactions. The characteristics of email communication such as asynchronous exchange might have contributed to some features of mindful interaction, for example, rich information. Participants were given the time and space to research and think about questions, and to compose long messages, which may be impossible in FTF situations. This suggests that email interaction may breed richer intercultural relationships. Another direction for future research may be comparative studies of mediated versus FTF intercultural interactions to see whether similar or different patterns of mindful interaction can be observed. Finally, the interculturality of mindfulness deserves further exploration. Future research may focus more on cultural differences in mindfulness.

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[1] Due to the different academic calendars used by colleges in China and the U.S., the project could only be started at the end of February when the semester started in China though it started much earlier in the U.S. and ended at the end of April when the semester ended in the U.S. though it lasted till July in China.

[2] EE represents Email Exchange, U10 represent U.S. Student #10. P + Num. represents Chinese students.

[3] When I used “mindful” or “mindless” communicators/participants, I did not mean that mindfulness was a constant attribute or trait of these individuals. Rather, I used it to mean that a particular email text happened to show mindfulness and the same person might display mindlessness in another email message.

[4] The openness and honesty in self disclosure may be due to the long distance separating the student participants. They might feel safer to open themselves up to each other because they knew that they would not face the person later. Another contributing factor may be cultural differences; they were strangers who only needed to interact online. As a result, they were able to hide behind the computer screen while laying bare their souls. A third contributing factor may be the perceived temporary nature of the relationship for the duration of the project. Finally, this email exchange project probably provided a nice opportunity for students to reveal their feelings or viewpoints that they might not be able to for fear of potential risks.