

How to Reduce Stereotypes: Intercultural Communication in Volunteer Work Camps

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Abstract

International volunteer work camps are places where people are united by one goal. Volunteers have to communicate on a daily basis as they live together and are involved in practical work projects. In late 2013, Adelina Bilalova (a 4th year student of Lomonosov Moscow State University, LMSU, Russia), participated in the Global Understanding course. The aim of this article is to share how the intercultural communication skills obtained by her in this course facilitated her work at her first volunteer experience in a work camp in Senftenberg, Germany, where she volunteered for two weeks. As a student in the Intercultural Communication Department at LMSU, she wanted to obtain some scientific evidence to support her hypothesis that during interactions between representatives of different cultures, by getting to know each other, people can easily abandon their prejudices and stereotypes of other cultures and obtain skills for multicultural communication. Everyday communication with peers eventually leads to discrediting many myths (i.e., negative stereotypes) related to various countries. Eventually, this can promote a better understanding of modern life in a multicultural world of which Russia is a significant part.

When coming across anything new or not well-known (e.g., different people or other cultures), it is natural for a person to refer to his/her background knowledge of this phenomenon and compare this perspective with the new situation. Adelina Bilalova (a 4th year student of Lomonosov Moscow State University, LMSU, Russia) was no exception. With her own background knowledge on other cultures, she was interested to find out how real life correlates with her knowledge of these cultures and evaluate cultural stereotypes. We know international mutual understanding is essential for communication and that negative stereotypes threaten communication therefore one of the most effective ways to avoid this is to be tolerant, polite, and show empathy. That is why Adelina decided to focus on stereotypes and learn about ways of overcoming them in order to achieve a deeper and more accurate understanding of other cultures.

This article describes Adelina Bilalova's personal experience with intercultural communication in light of her previous study of the theory of intercultural communication at LMSU. Her first experience was obtained virtually during her participation in the Global Understanding course in late 2013. Later on, it assisted her with her work at a volunteer camp for two weeks in Senftenberg, Germany, where her intercultural communication competence and skills were further developed. Participation in the first student *Global Issues Conference* has also contributed to her further development as a future specialist in the field of intercultural communication. We'd like to thank the conference organizers and the founders of the Global Understanding program for promoting friendly and open relationships between people from various cultures.

Background

Stereotypes are used to categorize a group of people. Harper (2006) writes that psychologists Abbate, Boca, and Bocchiaro offer a definition: "1. A stereotype is a cognitive structure containing the perceiver's knowledge, beliefs, and expectancies about some human social groups." Stereotypes can be positive or negative although most of them are negative: "2. They usually jeopardize intercultural communication and take on a negative tone. This is because stereotypes tend to overgeneralize the characteristics of a group of people. For example, we know that not *all* Asian students are hardworking and intelligent, and that there is no large group of people in which everyone is lazy."² There is a Native American saying: 'We should not judge another person until we have walked two moons in his moccasins', which means that empathy is an ability to imagine how you would feel when "wearing the shoes" (i.e., experiencing the life) of someone else. We believe that it is the key to successful communication. Furthermore, teachers of intercultural communication should assist in developing this ability in their students. They need to think about and analyze other people's behavior from different points of view but always with desire to understand and not to judge.

The Global Understanding course, together with our students' academic studies at LMSU, helps them in a variety of ways. They learn the importance of understanding other cultures, as well as valuable skills, tools and methods of intercultural communication. This allows them to have a better understanding of other peoples' national peculiarities, have more tolerant attitudes towards the representatives of other nations, and understand their cultural and personal differences.

Shortly after taking the Global Understanding course, Adelina went to Senftenberg, Germany, where she worked in a volunteer camp and where this experience stood in good stead. Adelina worked there with German children for two weeks organizing activities, parties, visits to the zoo, museum trips, guided tours, playing the drums and singing, etc. On a daily basis, Adelina had to communicate with people from different countries and thus with different attitudes. But she was already aware that it is normal and tried to understand different perspectives.

Adelina attended this work camp through the German organization International Youth

Services – Voluntary Services All Over the World (IJGD). IJGD organizes international work camps in Germany and in about 70 countries worldwide (www.ijgd.de): “Each work camp assembles a group of young people between 16 and 26. The group lives together and works about 25 hours a week in non-profit projects. All groups work voluntarily and without payment. They organize their free time activities and their daily tasks together...These camps take place in cooperation with cities, local authorities and just as much with independent associations, initiatives and organizations, primarily in the summer season. The groups work in nature and environmental protection, construction and renovation, in the social and pedagogical field or in cultural projects. Furthermore, IJGD offers work camps with specific thematic emphasis (work & study, art, media, camps for women and camps for teenagers).”

Cultural Stereotypes, Intercultural Communication, and Working Together

This work provided a healthy boost for Adelina’s self-confidence and life satisfaction. In addition, it also turned out to be a great opportunity so far as intercultural communication is concerned. Adelina did not realize how useful and helpful it would be for her and this was surprising to her. Below is given her view on this experience:

“Being a student of the Intercultural Communication Department at Lomonosov Moscow State University, I attended lectures on the theory of multicultural communication and studied many other courses related to this issue. I knew and agree with Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) that “Communication competence is the ability to choose a communication behavior that is both appropriate and effective for a given situation. Interpersonal competency allows one to achieve their communication goals without causing the other party to lose face. The communication model includes three components: 1) knowledge, 2) skill, and 3) motivation.”¹. I had some knowledge and some skills. I had great desire to communicate with representatives of other cultures as it is going to be my profession.”

“So alongside with my wish to work as a volunteer, I wanted to practice intercultural communication and see how it all works in real life. For example, I wanted to find some scientific evidence and prove my hypothesis, that during and due to direct interactions between representatives of different nations people can more easily get rid of their prejudices and stereotypes related to representatives of other cultures.”

No doubt, Adelina and other participants faced challenges with their daily communication during their work at the volunteer camp in Germany because the volunteers were from various countries around the world. For example, there were significant differences in pronunciation. In other cases, it was complicated for Adelina to understand what participants from East Asia really meant because they used metaphors which were commonly used in their home countries. On the other hand, participants from European countries were very straightforward. In addition, some of the participants commonly used modal verbs such as *should* or *must*, which appeared rude to some participants. This

might be connected to the common syntactic structures in some languages and not with behavior.

Camp volunteers worked together in a variety of ways. For example, three group leaders from Germany, Tanzania, and Ghana organized a so-called ‘welcome party’ which was during the first evening of the camp. The first task for fifteen young people was to split duties while preparing dinner which they managed to decide on within one hour. Most discussions were held after lunch and before lunch since this was the only time when they had breaks when all the participants were together except for dinner. For some participants, it was a difficult task to fully listen to other volunteer camp participants, but day by day, everyone became more polite, tolerant and patient. At the very first meeting, they had to decide the best way to plan evening activities and expenditures. For example, they had to decide what should they do with the 70-euro residential budget, but they managed to solve the problem and ordered 15 pizzas for dinner.

What is more, they worked in two shifts. One team worked with children by entertaining and educating them while another team helped the group leader by choosing activities, making plans for cultural evenings, and cooking national dishes (e.g., Turkish, Russian, Chinese, Italian, etc.). Once a week, there was a meeting where it was decided how to split responsibilities equally and three group leaders organized round-table discussions. There were some misunderstandings concerning food excesses and activity preferences but in general, the work with children and the outdoor evening activities ran smoothly. Everyone seemed eager to help each other by getting used to living in an international setting. It was also decided to have national evenings, where all participants were making presentations about their native culture. On the final day of the camp, everyone left feedback notes for every participant and some participants gave out souvenirs from their hometowns.

Changing Stereotypes for Camp Volunteers

From her previous experience from taking the Global Understanding course in late 2013, Adelina knew that this issue of stereotypes is important because as a rule, our knowledge about other countries is very limited. Stereotypes are mostly based on some commonplace ideas which are often untrue although some stereotypes can reflect some phenomena correctly. We share the opinion that in general, most stereotypes are harmful to the process of communication and interaction between nations as they impose needless biases against other people and often with no reason. How can we break down those prejudices?

Adelina was surprised to discover that during her work at the camp, it turned out that some stereotypes were disproven, for example:

- Germans don't often observe the time. She believed that punctuality is one of the main characteristics of a German national character.
- Not all Italians tend to be lazy
- Not all British are reserved
- Many Chinese tend to be tidy and neat

- Many people of African background can sing and dance well

Adelina's peers at the camp from other countries also admitted that they had changed their old stereotyped perceptions of people from some countries. Partners from China said that typical stereotypes of Germans are that they often drink, eat sausages, and that they are reserved and don't have a sense of humor. But after some time, as they told Adelina, those stereotypes changed. The stereotype that Germans tend to be direct, seemed to have been confirmed although this stereotype is not negative and so there is no threat in it.

Once again, how can we break down those prejudices? First of all, we should want to do this. The development of mankind proves that people have always wanted just to learn more about the world. Even in the years of the USSR, people learned foreign languages, read books in their original language, watched BBC documentaries which were shown in some TV programs dedicated to other countries, managed to listen to some foreign radio stations and so on. Russia's older generation's stereotypes of Britain and the USA were mainly formed on the basis of classical literature – Shakespeare, Dickens, Dreiser, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Hemingway and many others. Nowadays, in Russia, people have many more opportunities to learn about other cultures and people from their everyday modern life (e.g., the Internet and mass media). We can also read books, watch films and, of course, travel, although many people cannot afford it. Anyway, the best way to find true information about a country and its people's mindset is to make the acquaintance of people from other countries. Adelina used this chance while working in the volunteer camp.

What helped the camp participants to overcome misunderstanding? One of the American researchers in the field of stereotypes, Gordon Allport, suggested that group interactions are needed to improve relations between the group members. According to Allport (1979), "common goals within a particular situation, intergroup cooperation as well as the support of state and local authorities are needed for successful communication and understanding." Adelina's stay in the volunteer camps has confirmed his theory 100%. Everyone's commitment to volunteer work and common goals helped them find the appropriate way of communicating in an international setting.

Conclusion

Thanks to her work in the volunteer camp, Adelina came to the conclusion that we should accept the diversity of the world and be prepared for investigating this world. Today, there are different means for achieving this. Most of us have a good approach to different sources of information. We believe that teachers should encourage students to broaden their view on the world and take part in different international projects. At the same time, teachers should provide students with the necessary knowledge of theory, methods of processing information with new IT technologies, skills and competences of intercultural communication to make their way to achieving their aims faster and easier. Adelina's experience is a fine example of this approach. She was lucky to get such an experience with multi-cultural communication in a very productive and methodologically correct

succession i.e., the study of the theory of intercultural communication, virtual practice (Global Understanding course), and then actual practice (volunteer camp in Germany). We wish more students could follow Adelina's example.

In addition, Adelina had a chance to apply her theoretical knowledge while working in a volunteer work camp where people were united by one noble goal and were fulfilling one useful task. In the course of working together, volunteers learned more about each other and others' cultures. What is important to emphasize is that this was a very natural process which was interesting and therefore suitable for the young participants. They were learning about life and each other in a very easy and pleasant way. Participation in international volunteer work camps and sharing their ideas on various aspects of life with people from different countries gives us a better and more objective understanding of modern life in a multicultural world. The more we learn about each other, the shorter the path is to this mutual understanding.

Postscript: Volunteer Opportunities in Russia

These international work camps are worldwide. One can find them in all parts of the world –Latin America (e.g., Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala), North America (e.g., Canada), Africa (e.g., Ghana), Asia (e.g., India), and in various other countries. But not many people know that there are plenty of volunteer opportunities in Russia and each year all kinds of volunteer camps are being opened. The types of programs vary from teaching languages, studying natural resources, social work, and cultural events. Representatives of different nations are welcome to come to Russia and discover our culture which offers a unique combination of Western and Eastern Civilizations. For centuries, Russia has been living under the influence of both which has made a great impact on the formation and development of the Russian mindset. Work in social and eco-camps gives volunteers a chance to find more information about Russian history, traditions, and culture. Direct communication with people can help develop positive stereotypes (i.e., Russians are open-hearted and hospitable) and get rid of negative ones (e.g., all Russians wears fur hats or *ushankas*, they drink a lot, and are against laughter). More information can be found at the following websites:

- <http://www.kraskidetstva.ru/submenu/kak-nas-podderzhatj/>
- http://www.sodvo.ru/about/a_camp_with_sodrujestvo/
- <http://www.club-volonterov.ru/en>
- <http://www.greatbaikaltrail.org/>
- <http://www.ijgd.de/>

The most popular volunteer destinations are those in which participants work in youth centers, orphanages, summer camps in Moscow, Kazan, Rostov-on-Don, Samara, Ulyanovsk, Anapa, Novosibirsk etc. Volunteers who are fluent in English are assigned to a group of children for the entire session of a camp. As for eco-volunteering, nearly every national reservation attracts volunteers from all countries. For instance, the International Youth Centre of Nerekhta hosts experienced volunteers of all ages who are willing to work

with children. Another popular location for volunteer work camps is Lake Baikal which is a very interesting place to visit. It is situated in south-east Siberia and is 3.15 million hectares. Lake Baikal is the oldest (25 million years) and deepest (1,700 m) lake in the world. It contains 20% of the world's total unfrozen freshwater reserve. Known as the 'Galapagos of Russia', its age and isolation have produced one of the world's richest and most unusual collections of freshwater faunas. This is of exceptional value to evolutionary science. Each year hundreds of volunteers from various cultures travel there to help scientists and gain valuable experience in cross-cultural communication.

References

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