Points of Intersection: Facilitating Cultural Awareness of Self and Others in a Veterinary Medicine Communication Course

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Culture may be a situational factor that influences a veterinarian’s professional effectiveness.

Graduates (of veterinary medicine) interact with other students and increasingly with clients whose attitudes, beliefs, values and behaviors differ from their own. An understanding and respect for these differences has an impact on client communication and health care outcomes... Language and sociocultural differences have the potential to affect communication and the ability to build rapport, trust, and confidence in the veterinarian-client relationship... Mills et. al. 2001

Course Information
Applied Communication (CVM 6013; Professional Development): a course offered to 2nd year veterinary students (4 year program). Following an earlier course in basic communication this course now allows the students opportunities to practice communication.

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Course objectives
(In red are the objectives met through international component)
- Review and reaffirm your current communication skill set.
- Gain awareness of differences in communication styles.
- Identify specific communication challenges when dealing with various special populations (e.g., children, elderly pet owners and culturally diverse individuals), then apply your communication skills to real-life encounters with these populations.
- Gain practice in interviewing a client and performing a physical exam.
- Gain insight from interviewing individuals of varied cultural backgrounds.
- Build communication proficiency and confidence through simulated clinical encounters, video analysis and skill self-assessment.
- Gain experience and skill with peer assessment and feedback.

Situational Factors:
- International student interviews: awareness of ‘other’
  
  Countries of origin: Ghana, Brazil, Eritrea, Nepal, Egypt, Colombia, Spain, Argentina and China
  
  Examples of insight from interview:
  - Cattle play a different role now than here; religious sacrifice, working animals, as a downy, status symbol (the more you have the wealthier you are). (Ghana)
  - Some wealthy families in Eritrea do keep animals as pets, but the majority of people do not. ... for holidays, families often slaughter their own animals by slitting their throats.
  - 80% of Nepal is Hindu so they don’t eat any beef or slaughter their cows. They have a conservation center that uses the old cows that die and feed them to an endangered culture species. Nepalese do milk the cows and use their milk for labor.
  - Some (veterinarians in Egypt) care for falcons for trained hunters; people may pay over $700,000 for their care. This is a popular sport in Egypt for people that have more money.
  - What did we take out of this? In a nutshell: we took more out of this than we thought we would. We thought it would feel awkward and unnatural but instead it was a very helpful and light conversation... We are still discussing the differences between education in China vs. education in America. It’s so interesting! Chinese students seem to be a lot more studious than we are.

Discussion
Striving for cultural competence is a lifelong journey. One of the goals of this course was to provide students with opportunities to establish/build on their awareness of “self” and “other” so that they may strive for effective communication in all situations including encounters with diverse populations of clients. Through their journaling it became obvious that the students didn’t take the time to consider culture (their own or others) until they were ‘made’ to reflect on their experiences related to the various activities – highlighting the significance that reflective journaling has on the development of understanding “others” and “self”.

References: