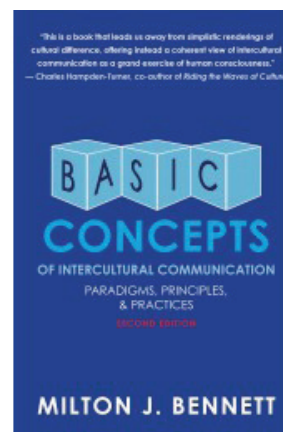


Book Review

Basic Concepts of Intercultural Communications

Paradigms, Principles and Practices - Second edition

by Milton J. Bennett
 U.S. \$ 25, 334 pages
 Published by Intercultural Press



In his new book, *Basic Concepts of Intercultural Communications*, Milton Bennett sets himself the ambitious goal of conveying the essence of intercultural theory. It is a thought-provoking compendium of 13 texts, providing a concise and coherent overview. Bennett's profound love for intercultural issues comes through clearly in this updated second edition. Six chapters are from his own writings and the others are from time-tested classics that every interculturalist should know.

As with the first edition 15 years ago, he dissects intercultural communication from the early days of relativism to the constructivist nature of the field today. What's different are the first five chapters, major additions that take into account today's fast-evolving multicultural societies and reconcile the basic principles of intercultural communication with current applications in education and business.

Like his DMIS model, he sequences the texts in terms of complexity, ensuring that the reader progressively attains the level of competent understanding. What I enjoyed most was Bennett's first chapter, *A Constructivist Frame for Intercultural Communication*. Drawing from the theories of Kelly, Brown and von Foerster, he writes that we don't perceive events directly; our experiences are, instead, built through templates, a set of categories with which we organize our perception.

Striving to fully understand the constructivist approach, I read this

chapter again and again. All the while, as constructivist theory states, my mind was constructing new templates which I then used to arrange and widen my awareness. Or, to put it in another way, I became increasingly sensitive to the constructive explanation of intercultural relationships. I couldn't help but feel the very real joy of learning, the "ecstasy" of finally comprehending!

Bennett distinctly points out that obtaining intellectual understanding is not in an end in itself; its purpose is to generate an alternative experience, that of becoming sensitive to the *feeling of appropriateness* that accompanies a new template. This intuitive grasp provides a deeper intercultural experience for trainers, who can then facilitate others in acquiring their own experiences.

Without condescension or false complexity, he concludes the chapter eloquently. "Then, and only then, can we truly consider ourselves capable of exercising and teaching intercultural competence."

In his second chapter, *Intercultural Epistemology and Paradigmatic Confusion*, he develops his leitmotiv, "coherent theory generates powerful practice". This is where Bennett's intellectual brilliance shines, as he systematically describes the epistemological assumptions of the positivist, relativist and constructivist paradigms, and what their implications mean for intercultural theory.

Editorial	2
Sylvia Schroll-Machl	3
<i>An interview with one of the most original thinkers of German culture</i>	
Problem-solving in Joint German-American Teams	9
I'm the Creator and Destroyer of Worlds — and so are You!	11
Of gays and lesbians...	15
Book Reviews	18
Events, workshops, congresses	21

Book Review

'Basic Concepts...' continued

Briefly, the positivist treats culture as having a static existence, which can be observed objectively. The relativist thinks of culture as a closed system with a set of roles and rules used as a frame of reference in understanding other cultures. And the constructivist sees culture as built on social foundations necessitating a dialectic "other perspective".

A stickler for coherent, logical analysis, Bennett points out that if the paradigm underlying a practice is different than that of the claimed outcome, the resulting incoherence weakens the practice and harms the overall credibility of the field. Bennett makes his point with the popular iceberg metaphor many practitioners use to describe culture.

Although the vast majority of intercultural facilitators understand culture as a dynamic process, generating artifacts and patterns of behavior, many still insist on comparing culture to the static iceberg, a positivist notion. Students are told that what we see is the tip of the iceberg. Ninety percent of the culture lies beneath the surface, where invisible assumptions and values are waiting to surprise and trap the unsuspecting foreign sojourner.

It's a clever comparison and provokes lively images of a Titanic-like disaster but it's essentially transmitting the wrong message. One comes away with the idea that culture is a 'thing', a stationary object. Yet if one accepts the constructivist approach, that culture is a dialectic process, coordinating

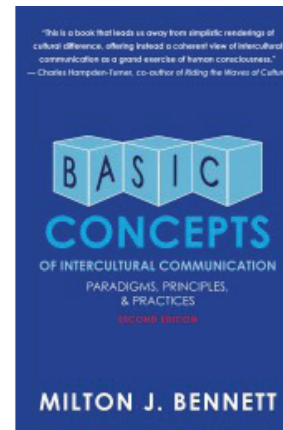
meanings and actions, then the positivist iceberg contradicts the inherently complex nature of culture.

Other parts of the book add new perspectives, such as *Stumbling Blocks in Intercultural Communication*, an excellent primer on the ins and outs of intercultural education by LaRay M. Barna. Taking a constructivist perspective, the author sees "assumption of similarity" as the most difficult obstacle to overcome when people of different backgrounds interact. Effective intercultural relations come from the ability to see and construe relevant cultural differences.

What struck throughout was Bennett's overwhelming desire to provide selective writings which build a coherent framework. *Basic Concepts of Intercultural Communication* is an exacting work that challenges our thoughts and inclinations. Illuminating the subject in unexpected ways, it develops the mind and serves to provide a new view of things through renovated eyes.

Milton Bennett is an educator (from the Latin *educatio*: to bring up). A groomer of talent, one who has the gift to impart a deeper understanding of things and supplies the tools with which to increase that understanding. Explaining without being heavy-handed, exposing without imposing, his work brings the mind to full flower and offers readers fulfillment they might not find otherwise. The book is demanding but, at the same time, of lasting substance. An outstanding achievement.

Reviewed by Patrick Schmidt



Editorial	2
Sylvia Schroll-Machl <i>An interview with one of the most original thinkers of German culture</i>	3
Problem-solving in Joint German-American Teams	9
I'm the Creator and Destroyer of Worlds — and so are You!	11
Of gays and lesbians...	15
Book Reviews	18
Events, workshops, congresses	21