C^3: Color x Culture x Custom = Communication
(Presented by Annette Noble, Recently Retired
Instructor of Mathematics at UMES, with thanks to
Dr. Sheila B. Richardson)

Being a mathematician, C^3 (or C-cube or C to the 3rd power) seemed appropriate to indicate how large a topic this is – of cubic proportion!! When I “Googled” this topic “Color x Culture x Custom = Communication”, you will never believe what was the first hit on the list? The African Languages Research Project (ALRP) with this topic and other topics for the conference. So I changed my search to “Color & Culture & Custom = Communication”. In the list of 258,000 related items the first item was Term Papers on Race Culture Color. I quickly moved on since I know the University has a strict policy on plagiarism and I did not want to be subject to the University’s judicial system.

Also before I begin, a Disclaimer – I am not a scholar on this topic, have not written one paper for publication on this topic as it relates to communication of which you need a common language, but there are scholars, who are presenting scholarly works at this conference.
The first order of business is to define each piece, Color, Culture and Custom, and then relate them. Rather than going through almost a complete column of definitions and uses of for example, Color, in Webster’s New World Dictionary of American English, 3rd College Edition 1986, you will define what each means to you.

Have you ever imagined yourself as a Color? Look at the Color of your clothes. What does the Color say or communicate about you? Is a language required for this communication?

What is culture? Do you have culture? Do I know your culture by your color? Is a language required to communicate your culture?

Do you have a custom or customs? How do you define your custom? Is it the way you walk or talk? Do I know your custom by your color and/or your culture? Is a language required to communicate your custom?

Dr. Mona Lake Jones, in The Color of Culture (Your Very Special Book of Poems), 1993, relates the two in her opening piece titled Culture in which she states that “Everybody has culture,
even though some folks think they don’t. Culture is often vibrant and loud or sometimes quiet and subtle, but you know it when you see it because it has color!” Color here I believe is revealing one’s true self by making one’s opinions, positions, etc. known. (Webster, 1986)

Intercultural understanding begins with individuals who study and learn another language. This knowledge gives one the opportunity to learn the color, culture, customs, beliefs, and values of a people. It also provides an insight into other perspectives.

In order to survive in a global community every nation must have individuals who are competent in other languages and familiar with other cultures. This is necessary so that they can bridge the cultural gap between their country and another country and step inside the mind and context of that other culture. In a world where nations and peoples are ever more dependent upon another to supply goods and services, solve political disputes, and ensure international security, understanding other cultures is very important.
As globalization, mobility, and communications bring the world ever closer together, it is urgent that the global citizen be competent in other languages. The United States is the only industrialized country that routinely graduates students from high school who lack knowledge of a foreign language. Whereas 52.7% of Europeans are fluent in both their native language and at least one other language, only 9.3% of Americans are fluent in both their native tongue and another language (Trimnell, 2005). This fact does not fair well for the future of America in a global society.

If the U.S. is to continue to be a major participant on the international stage they must institute educational policies to encourage or even mandate that students learn a foreign language.

Knowing another language and culture affords one the unique opportunity of seeing one’s own culture from an outside perspective. Contact with other languages, colors, cultures, and customs gives one the unique opportunity to step outside one’s familiar scope of existence and view another country’s colors, cultures, customs, traditions, and norms as well as your own value system through the eyes of others. This knowledge opens the doors of communication.
Ladies and gentlemen I have loved sharing this topic with you and hopefully I did it with Color, Culture and Custom and began my own communication with you!!


Trimnell, E. 2005. *Why You Need a Foreign Language*