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The DIE is cast: The continuing evolution of intercultural communication's favorite classroom exercise

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the origins and continual evolution of what may be the most widely used exercise in intercultural communication workshops and classes. The popular DIE exercise, developed in the 1970s, was derived from General Semantics exercises presented in the Speech discipline decades before Intercultural Communication emerged as a field in itself. The exercise, which is known by its ominous acronym "DIE," asks people to observe an unusual object or a photograph of an unfamiliar scene, and then first "describe" what they see, then "interpret" possible meanings, and finally to "evaluate" by giving their value judgments. While the DIE exercise has been a favorite among teachers and professional trainers in the area of intercultural communication with variations in format and applications for three decades, the ambiguity between *interpretation* and *evaluation* and the ominous acronym itself have been problematic.

This article proposes a DAE version utilizing a significant Korean word 다 [dae] as a more felicitous acronym: describe, analyze, evaluate. This avoids the negative association of the DIE acronym and the often mentioned ambiguity of the words *interpretation* and *evaluation*. In addition, attention to other cultural perspectives is signaled through the use of a non-English word as the name of the exercise.

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1. Introduction

What many intercultural instructors and trainers feel most important about their presentations is often revealed through their choice of favorite exercises. In the field of intercultural communication, what has come to be known as "the DIE exercise" is one such example. Used for decades in undergraduate and graduate courses in intercultural communication, as well as by professional trainers in the field, the DIE – "describe, interpret, evaluate" – exercise is intended to foster self-awareness of personal and cultural assumptions, promote the appreciation of cognitive complexity, and the importance of frame-shifting when encountering the unfamiliar.

"Encountering the unfamiliar" is but a starting point in our world today. Students represent a greater diversity in background, age, race, and ethnicity than ever before, as do national populations almost without exception. In the 2006–2007 academic year alone, the number of international students enrolled in colleges and universities in the United States increased to a total of more than a half million¹ with students from Asia accounting for 59% of all U.S. international enrollments, led by India, followed by China, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan (IIE, 2007b).

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¹ According to the 2007 *Open Doors* report, 582,984 international students contributed \$14.5 billion dollars to the U.S. economy. Department of Commerce data describe U.S. higher education as the country's fifth largest service sector export, as these students bring money into the national economy and provide revenue to their host states (Institute of International Education (IIE), 2007b).

The influence of globalization has made the whole world a place of employment, and has also promoted a growing number of U.S. students to study abroad.² This increase reveals recognition by universities and students alike of the importance of seeing a world beyond that which is reflected in the media and through one's own limited experience. As Bennett (2008) observed, students today need “not only international experience, but also the capacity to engage that experience transformatively” (p. 13). Toward this end, any exercise that stimulates awareness and helps people to engage more effectively is desirable.

2. The “Classic” DIE exercise

The exercise identified by its acronym, DIE, asks people to distinguish among what may be called objective descriptions (Describe) from those which are subjective or suggest some culturally based subjectivity, including emotionally laden reactions (Evaluate). When going from the objective to the subjective, one moves through a process of sense-making (Interpret) that goes beyond what can be objectively described, such as making inferences or speculations about what is not known. The rationale for the exercise is the realization that these three kinds of observations are often not distinguished, and people react and speak from personal and cultural perspectives as if they were describing some objective truth. This is important when people from different cultural backgrounds come together, as in today's classroom and workplace, as well as when attempting to understand meanings and motives that are culturally distinct. This simplest of exercises helps to foster a more thoughtful, sensitive, and exploratory atmosphere for serious discussions of more complex intercultural topics.

In its most frequently used form, as developed by Bennett and Bennett in 1975 (Pusch, 2004), students are presented with an “unusual” object, photograph, or other stimulus which may have significance in some cultures but not for those to whom it is presented. Then, often working in smaller groups, people are asked to describe, as objectively as possible, what they see, avoiding guesses or value judgments. For many this is a surprisingly difficult task. If the stimulus item is a photograph, for example, observers often find it hard to distinguish what the picture presents from the meanings that those viewing the photo infer. For example, if shown a picture of a student in a classroom putting her feet on the empty desk in front of her, some may say that they see “a student who is relaxing,” while others may say that they see “a student who is rude,” and someone else may see “behavior that is absolutely unacceptable in a classroom.” Generally, people find it most challenging to restrict their first comments to those that can be considered “objective,” limited to the visual information presented.

The next task – to “interpret,” or make educated guesses – is somewhat easier since one has more freedom to imagine contexts in which many interpretations might be plausible. Here is where first reactions that were not purely descriptive may now be appropriate. The last task, to express their evaluations, is the easiest of all, as there may be an even wider range of judgments offered, depending upon, in this case, one's expectations of appropriate behavior in the classroom. Judgments often reveal more about the person making the judgment, and the cultural meanings that the person has internalized, than about the image or other physical stimuli that evokes the judgment. This theme is one that people come to recognize through their discussions of the process. This includes stereotypes that exist only in the mind of the observer and not in what is objectively presented.

3. Importance of the DIE exercise

The exercise helps to bring out in an engaging way several themes important in communication generally, but with particular significance when considering intercultural relations. We often respond to people or situations with which we are least familiar with our most subjective evaluations, projecting our judgments onto what we think we see (or hear or feel or otherwise perceive). This kind of projection is especially risky when people from a similar background (regional, national, ethnic, generational, etc.) share their reactions and find confirmation in their agreement. Consensus is taken as validation. The DIE exercise encourages reversing the usual order of response, withholding one's first reactions, and in the process becoming more aware of how easily and unconsciously one may trespass into the realm of speculation and judgment, and how difficult it can be to limit one's comments to what can be described directly.

An additional benefit of the exercise is that it invites greater attentiveness to what is presented and thus encourages people to observe things that they had not immediately noticed, and to be more aware of what they do not realize. In other words, because “interpretation” and “evaluation” move beyond description, these reactions necessarily discourage further observation and description. Thus through this exercise, a kind of modesty through self-awareness as well as objectivity may be encouraged.

The broader purpose of the exercise, of course, is to guide people toward greater discernment when encountering the unfamiliar, including mindfully withholding judgment. In some ways, this is an abnormal act as it appears our reactions can be judgmental even before we consciously realize what provokes that reaction. Outside of one's conscious awareness, one's felt and often implicit response is an *Evaluate* – such as “beautiful,” “exotic,” “impersonal,” “friendly,” “strange,” etc.

² In 2007, the number of U.S. study abroad students increased by 8.5% over the previous year to a total of nearly 223 534, according to the *Open Doors* report (IIE, 2007a). The aggregate number of U.S. students studying abroad has grown dramatically, a 270% increase from 1993–1994 through 2005–2006 (IIE, 2006; IIE, 2007a).

As noted, the DIE exercise may be among the most widely used exercises in intercultural communication classes and workshops. For decades, copies of the exercise have been distributed through workshops for teachers, trainers, advisors and others. Instructions for the DIE exercise may also be accessed through the Internet (Bennett, Bennett, & Stillings, 1977).

4. General semantics and the origins of DIE

The DIE exercise for intercultural communication workshops and classes was an adaptation in 1975 of an approach that appeared over thirty years previously in courses in General Semantics which were frequently included in Speech curricula. For almost three decades, beginning in the 1940s, General Semantics courses, or “units” within courses, were widespread. These were strongly influenced by writers and teachers who had been excited by the concerns, vision, and relevance of the work of Alfred Korzybski whose writing style in his major work, *Science and Sanity* (1933), may be charitably considered eccentric.

The name for that aspect of linguistics which examines the relationship between symbols and what they represent is “semantics.” Korzybski (1933) was also concerned with that relationship, but he believed that it affected every aspect of human behavior – hence his was a broader or more general semantics concern. He believed that most people confused words with what they might represent and indeed often used words which had no objective referent to begin with. He was particularly critical of the word “is” which he felt led to the confusion, and placed the blame (mistakenly, it has been said) on Aristotelian logic, beginning with the Law of Identity ($A = A$). Korzybski characterized his approach as “non-Aristotelian.” He decried what he called our “intensional orientation,” meaning that we largely seem to live in a world shaped by words, a world as we imagine it to be or want it to be. This is in contrast to what he called an “extensional orientation,” meaning giving primary attention to what is observable and without the names that filter our perception. High level abstractions were regarded as especially dangerous—and the early popularizations of his work resonated with their application to the slogans in wartime propaganda of that era.

Today Korzybski may be identified as part of a larger logical positivist tradition of philosophy dominant in the first half of the twentieth century. Korzybski, like contemporaries such as John Dewey, was disillusioned by the First World War and its aftermath, but saw hope in rationality and the scientific method as the opportunity for a fresh start. Korzybski’s ideas came into the field of Speech, and later Communication, through several writers whose books were as engaging as Korzybski’s were off-putting.³ It is notable that Korzybski’s first work arose in the aftermath of World War I, and the writings of those who adapted and popularized them emerged in the years in the era of World War II and its immediate aftermath.

Most prominent among the writers who popularized General Semantics were S.I. Hayakawa (1941) whose 1941 book, *Language in Action*, was the first college textbook ever to be selected by the Book-of-the-Month Club; and Irving J. Lee (1941), a charismatic professor in the College of Speech at Northwestern University, whose book, *Language Habits in Human Affairs*, also appeared that same year. In both books, and others that followed including University of Iowa Speech professor Wendell Johnson’s (1946) popular *People in Quandaries*, some attention was given to the importance of distinguishing among statements of fact, inference and judgment that are too often conflated, in part because the use of “is” does not distinguish.⁴ When the DIE exercise was developed, statements of fact were called “description,” inferences were “interpretations,” and judgments were “evaluations.” In more recent years, the best known exponent of the General Semantics tradition was Neil Postman (1988), Chair of Communication Arts at New York University, whose deft observations on contemporary society made him a popular social critic. He was active in the General Semantics field and for a decade, beginning in 1977, was the editor of the General Semantics journal, *ETC*.

General Semantics courses were most prominent in the 1950s and 1960s, but were fading in popularity in Speech and Communication programs at the time when innovative courses in interpersonal communication, nonverbal communication, and intercultural communication were emerging in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This also coincided with the time when many departmental names were changing from Speech to Speech Communication, and then to Communication, reflecting a shift toward the social sciences in a discipline that identified itself as central to the humanities (“rhetoric” was part of “the trivium,” the first three of what became the classic “seven liberal arts”).

4.1. Critiques of general semantics

Like many of the practical applications from General Semantics, the attention given to distinguishing among facts, inferences, and judgments became part of a variety of courses in Speech. Today many of Korzybski’s goals seem radical, as with his call for “the restructuring of human nervous systems.” Others seem passé, and both were mocked by Gardner (1957) in an attack in his book, *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science*, in which he invoked the aphorism, that “Korzybski’s ideas are both new and good, but unfortunately what is good is not new, and what is new is not good (p. 131).” Postman believed that General Semantics never quite recovered from that critique.

The adaptations of General Semantics in Speech and Communication courses were more modest: only if we can become aware of our everyday language habits and alter them and be more aware of our reactions to the words and other symbols

³ For example, based on his emphasis that any statement is always incomplete, as words are but abstractions from what they appear to represent, Korzybski believed that one should always keep in mind the incompleteness of statements, and thus the need to add a mental “etc.” To represent this typographically in *Science and Sanity* (1933), most sentences end not with a period, but with a comma.

⁴ In later years, a fourth category was added, statements that are tautologies, especially definitions, by John Condon, *Semantics and Communication* (1967).

that we encounter each day, can we change our behavior and our reactions. The same principle of awareness characterizes the DIE exercise. The General Semantics emphasis was also radical in its time for taking standards that Korzybski ascribed to “science” and applying them to a discipline (Speech, or more traditionally, Rhetoric) so solidly grounded in the humanities. The applied social science tradition in Communication was largely what led to new genres of theory, research and practice that came to be “intercultural communication,” as well as emphases in “nonverbal communication,” “interpersonal communication,” “organizational communication,” and “health communication,” among others.

5. Development of DIE exercise

The DIE innovation, for use in intercultural communication workshops in the mid-1970s, is credited to Janet Bennett and Milton Bennett when they were doctoral students at the University of Minnesota. The Speech Communication Department at Minnesota, through the efforts of Professor William Howell, offered a pioneering graduate program in intercultural communication. There, graduate students had the opportunity to facilitate multicultural (primarily international) discussion groups in a novel variation of a “training group” known as the Intercultural Communication Workshop (ICW). The DIE exercise proved to be an effective way of engaging students from many cultural backgrounds and served as a relatively safe lead into discussions of more challenging real-life issues. The description of the DIE activity as modified at Portland State University continues to be widely distributed in the *Intercultural Communication Workshop Facilitator's Manual* (Bennett et al., 1977). Additional modifications to the DIE exercise in connection with the ICW were developed. The DIE has also been applied to teaching culture in the language classroom (Ryffel, 1997), and Ting-Toomey (1999) incorporated the DIE as part of her Observe-Describe-Interpret-Suspend Judgment (ODIS) model.

In addition to its frequent references in major standard compilations such as *The Handbook of Intercultural Training* (Landis, Bennett, & Bennett, 2004), this exercise has been recently conceptualized and employed by many instructors and practitioners in culture learning and study abroad settings in considerable detail (Savicki, 2008a,b). Especially in the study abroad context where it is important to develop a structured approach in order to process cultural encounters to transformative learning, DIE has been the most frequently used exercise to generate “positive coping skills of active coping, planning, and positive reinterpretation” (Savicki, 2008a,b, p. 87).

As useful as the DIE exercise has been, there are two problems commonly reported by those who present it. One problem is that the distinction between “interpretation” and “evaluation” that the teacher or facilitator asks people to make is not always clear; indeed, in ordinary language usage the two words may be synonymous. As a result, the instructor or trainer often must make a special effort to explain how these words are being used in this particular exercise. Moreover, it sometimes happens that even the teacher or trainer becomes confused when using these terms. A more obvious problem is the acronym itself: DIE! Even before beginning the exercise, the instructor often feels obliged to apologize or make a joke about the acronym, or both, which is not an ideal way to begin an exercise.

6. The DAE version

The most recent permutation of the model is in response to perceived problems with the classic DIE exercise and the changing international education environment, including student demographics in higher education today. In 2008 a new version was introduced, the DAE (Describe, Analyze, Evaluate) using the Korean word **대**[dae]⁵ as a more felicitous acronym (Nam, Condon, & Gandert, 2008). In addition to avoiding some problems with using DIE, the choice of a word from a language other than English may have an additional value in the era of globalization including, as noted above, the significant presence of international students in the U.S. higher education.

As an acronym for the exercise, DAE stands for: Describe, Analyze, Evaluate. “Describe” and “Evaluate” are the same as in “the classic” DIE, but what is intended when asked to “Analyze” is clearer to students than when they are asked to “Interpret.” This is chiefly because the meaning of “interpret” often extends into more subjective reactions, including passing judgment. Also, “interpret” is a term associated with the arts, while “analyze” is more frequently used in the context of sciences, mathematics, or other problem solving endeavors.

The Korean word “DAE (in phonetics [dae])” is a significant and one of the most widely used words in Korean. It carries several meanings that reflect the values of this exercise: “counter to our instincts,” “serious,” and “a foundation.” (Si-Sa Elite Korean-English Dictionary, 1996, p. 394).

(1) **대** [dae] (**對** in Chinese)⁶: “the opposite; anti; against”

⁵ The word **대** is pronounced like the first syllable of “daddy” (in phonetics [dae]).

⁶ “DAE”, a word in the Korean language, is written “**대**.” This word combines one consonant (ㄷ) and one vowel (애). “ㄷ” is pronounced like [d] in English, and the pronunciation of “애” is similar to the first vowel sound of the English word “apple” [æ]. As modern Korean is based on a phonetic writing system, the sound of “DAE” in Korean language (**대**) is pronounced as the letters sound in English “[dæ]”. While the word **대**[DAE] carries at least twenty different meanings in Korean language (see Appendix A), the above three major concepts represent the intercultural significance of DAE for the purpose of this exercise. The phonetic writing system for Korean language (*Han Gul*) was invented in the 15th century by King Sejong during the Chosun Dynasty. Before then, Korean was a spoken language but Chinese characters were used for writing. Based on this historical background, Chinese characters remain in limited use for word clarification in modern Korean.

(2) 대 [dae] (大 in Chinese): “great,” “prominent,” “serious”

(3) 대 [dae] (臺 in Chinese): “support; a foundation”

One meaning of 대(DAE) is “the opposite; anti; against.” That meaning of “*dae*,” to go against our habits or instinct, is at the core of DAE exercise. When facing something unfamiliar or that is different from our own cultural and social values, we unconsciously tend to immediately judge and evaluate rather than reflecting on what we see or what actually happened. In addition, 대(DAE) carries meanings of “great,” “important,” and “serious.” The process of first describe and analyze before evaluate is important in order both to understand one’s own cultural biases and to better appreciate different aspects and values of other cultures. It is a mindful perspective when encountering the unfamiliar. 대(DAE) also means “foundation” in Korean. The ability to be able to describe and objectively analyze before making any judgment or evaluation is part of the foundation in the field of intercultural communication, and underlies many of the capabilities of those who work professionally across cultures.

7. Features and applications of DAE

In addition to avoiding the negative associations of DIE, the DAE reduces the ambiguity associated with the instruction to interpret. This is chiefly because the meaning of “interpret” often extends into more subjective reactions, including passing judgment. The word “evaluate” can connote judgment offered from a safe distance from what it is being judged, and sometimes from a superior position which can lead to and be reflected in an “*object*-ification,” of what is judged. Also, “interpret” suggests subjective judgment, while “analyze” connotes “objectivity,” which is the desired emphasis for this exercise. “Analyze” raises fewer questions than “Interpret,” and moves the discussion along. In the exercise, the subjective responses should wait until the description and analysis have been considered.

In the classic DIE model, the best choice to stimulate discussion is something which is novel to everyone observing, something to provoke curiosity and challenge one’s reactions. Today, in classroom discussions as in much of everyday life, what previously may have seemed distant, even “exotic,” can now also seem immediate and familiar.

In Stringer and Cassidy (2009), the three steps of DIE are explained in the following way:

<i>Description</i>	What I see (hear, etc.)
<i>Interpretation</i>	What helps explain what I see
<i>Evaluation</i>	What I feel about what I see

One way to explain “Describe,” “Analyze,” and “Evaluate” is to suggest three questions and indicate standards for agreement:

<i>Description</i>	What is going on?	(General agreement)
<i>Analysis</i>	Why is it happening?	(Alternative explanations possible)
<i>Evaluation</i>	How do I feel about it?	(No one else has to agree)
	[If showing someone in a photo] How do I think she/he feels?	

Exercises, such as the DAE, are even more meaningful when there are occasions for people to talk about the meanings that an object, a picture, a story or even a single word evokes for them. In today’s culturally diverse classes, the object or photo for discussion may be one that was contributed by a student who senses that at least part of the culture with which he or she identifies is not likely to be understood or appreciated by many classmates. After following the conventional procedure in the exercise, the students may then tell about their feelings, memories and stories that they connect with what was just discussed by the classmates. As a result, the exercise moves beyond one that emphasizes careful observation, critical thinking, and suspension of judgment. It provides one of those “teachable moments” when the learning links the objective and the affective, the content and relationship meanings, which in turn may also lead to increased respect and understanding among the students themselves.

The exercise has been used in courses in photojournalism and photography for ethnographic fieldwork in order to increase students’ sensitivity to visual detail and complexity. By requiring students to continue to describe before moving to the analysis and judgments (including aesthetic and rhetorical effectiveness), the DAE model sharpens the students’ abilities as photographers and critics (Gandert, 2009, personal communication).

The DAE also has a place in pre-departure training and assessment of the impact for the sojourn experience. Photographs of social situations in the host society, especially where there are potential challenges for the sojourners, may be presented before departure. The DAE serves to sharpen the perception, clarify possible explanations for what one see in the photo, and encourage the suspension of judgments. Upon return, the sojourners may be expected to notice even more detail in such photos, suggest more thoughtful analyses, and evoke fresh and perhaps more positive evaluations.

8. Conclusion

In this article, we reviewed the DIE exercise: its antecedents, its history, its value and limitations. The goal of the exercise is to foster discernment between what can be said objectively, what can be said in the realm of inference or speculation, and what may be expressed as value judgment and personal opinion. The newly proposed DAE exercise avoids the negative association of the DIE acronym and the often mentioned ambiguity of the words *interpretation* and *evaluation*. In addition, the choice of the non-English word DAE (대) with significant intercultural meanings is appropriate for our changing demographics in education and organizations.

As with other exercises and activities that reliably serve over a period of time, this popular intercultural exercise has been adapted to different needs at different times for different purposes. It is as important as ever to take care not to confuse the observed with assumptions or guesses about the observed, and not to confuse either of those with how we feel about what we encounter. Perhaps the most significant difference between the earlier goals of this kind of exercise and those that are most important today is that a half century ago, the goal was to encourage a more individual, objective habit of mind, to be more cautious and critical in an attitude central to the scientific method. Today the value may be more for the interpersonal and intercultural implications of presenting as fact – or description – that which may arise from personal, cultural, and often historic power relationships. “History,” descriptions of “culture,” and other categories of canonical “knowledge” are challenged for presenting as “description” that which is a disguised “evaluation.” In this respect, too, the DIE – or, as we suggest, the DAE – model is as relevant to the evolving intercultural field today as it was fifty years ago.

Appendix A. Different meanings of DAE (대) in Korean language

DAE (대) in Korean language carries at least twenty different meanings (Si-Sa Elite Korean-English dictionary, 1996).

- 대:
 - (1) a bamboo (flexibility)
- 대 (對 in Chinese character)
 - (2) the opposite; anti; against
 - (3) a pair; a counterpart; a parallel; a couple
 - (4) versus; against; between; toward; to
- 대 (大 in Chinese character)*:
 - (5) great (scholar); prominent (writer)
 - (6) serious (matter); grave (question)
 - (7) largeness; bigness; greatness; large size
 - (8) heavy (loss); severe (storm)
- 대 (臺 in Chinese character)
 - (9) a support; foundation; stand; a rest; a pedestal; a base; a rack *
 - (10) a level; a mark
 - (11) a unit of counting automobiles, machines, etc.
 - (12) a zone; a region (e.g., a tropical zone)
- 대:
 - (13) a stalk; a stem; a pipe; a holder
 - (14) spirit; mettle; backbone; pluck; courage
 - (15) a smoke; a puff
 - (16) a blow; a stroke; a punch; a hit
 - (17) a shot; an injection
- 대 (代 in Chinese character)
 - (18) a generation; an age (in his 20s); an era
 - (19) a price; a charge; a rate; a fee
- 대 (隊 in Chinese character)
 - (20) a party; a company; a body (of troops); a corps

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