

Multicultural Learning

An intensive cross-cultural experience is both dislocating and disorienting. It presents unique challenges for learning. Often this experience is described as "culture shock," suggesting a distinctive psychological experience. But culture shock is in no way a distinctive life experience. It is merely the escalation of the normal life process of coping with change. The questions for the traveler, therefore, might be:

What personal qualities do I need to develop to best cope with change?

How can I really learn and not just react?

How can I learn to ask questions that elicit answers appropriate to the context?

How do my feelings, values, and attitudes construct barriers to learning?

"With appropriate questions, proper study, and careful concern, it is possible to develop a 'double vision'—the ability to see more than one side of an event. It is also possible to increase one's empathy—the ability to sense how an event appears and feels to someone else."—Author unknown

There will be times when you feel that you simply cannot absorb one more new thing, so it is important to have a discipline of listening, observation, and data collection. It is perhaps even more important to have a learning methodology; to develop the basic skills of cross-cultural learning.

As you prepare for your journey, try to be systematic. Your natural curiosity has probably already taken you to an atlas and some sources of basic information. Now start to process the information.

Your questions can be of any sort, trivial or profound, since their purpose is to serve as a catalyst for further thought.

Record the expectations you have as you enter into this experience. Each of your expectations embodies a whole set of questions. Turn your statements into questions you are hoping the experience will address for you. Framing questions is the first and most important step in learning to learn.

Your questions can be of any sort, trivial or profound, since their purpose is to serve as a catalyst for further thought. As you continue in your preparation, some of your questions will be answered; your first questions will be superseded by others that arise from your reading or conversations. Maintain a list of questions, revising them as you go along. Even after your arrival, you may want to continue revising your question list as you learn and discover more.

The question list will help you practice asking questions and will slow the usual tendency to make judgments (statements) before the questions have even been considered.

Asking questions that create dialogue is an art form. Like any art form, it requires

practice and fine-tuning. Keeping a question list will fine-tune your skills. Keep in mind that this handbook is intentionally directed at the learning style in which you live. Culturally, North Americans tend to be oriented to the objective world, to activity and achievement. Just remember that there are cultures in which other qualities are more valued. You may encounter a different sense of order. For cross-cultural learning, very helpful personal skills include: a sense of humor, moderate expectations, tolerance of ambiguity, and the ability to cope with disappointment.



What is culture?

Before embarking on your cross-cultural journey, consider what culture is, what your own culture is, and how your culture may differ from the one you will visit.

People often make the mistake of calling what is familiar "best" when in fact it is only familiar. This can express itself in feelings of cultural superiority. We in the United States must conscientiously increase our willingness to receive the cultural insights and values of others.

Consider your motivations for embarking on a cross-cultural journey. Which of the following are included? What do they reveal? What is behind them?

A. *Personal pleasure; learning about the curious beliefs and practices of others; helping others who are more unfortunate than you; showing others a better way of life; teaching others what they should know about God, religion, or progress.*

B. *Learning from other cultures; discovering other ways of life that can enrich your own; receiving as well as giving; engaging in a mutual experience of mission and action; openness and sensitivity to human differences; gaining new perspectives on your own culture, faith, and nation; and joining with others in establishing peace and human community.*

There are subtle but significant differences between these two sets of motivations. The first set has been the traditional approach to cross-cultural relationships and does have its positive side. Yet we and our global neighbors have grown in our understanding of partnership. The second set of motivations described a fuller, deeper more mutually-empowering relationship, recognizing each party as equally gifted.

Because it is often difficult to identify or recognize our own culture, it is important that you and your group include a systematic study of the life and cultures of the United States in your learning about and engagement with another culture. Our responses to other cultures are influenced by the attitudes, beliefs, values, assumptions and biases, that shape our own life.

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The following are United States value systems that may vary greatly from other cultures.

- Wealth as a measure of success
- The idea that United States citizens are special people
- Private ownership of land and resources
- Individualism
- Concepts of time, work, and space
- Control and subjugation of nature
- Competitiveness, aggression, self-indulgence, activism, informality, self-confidence, and optimism.

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Look more objectively at our country's dominant culture. Read resources from other cultures that provide perspectives and critiques of United States culture. Sometimes the voices are harsh, but listen to what they have to say.

Or, imagine you are describing life and customs in the United States to someone who has never heard of or visited this country. For example, try explaining an NFL strike.

The purpose of engaging with other cultures is not to study them, but to learn from people of those cultures and receive the gifts of diverse cultures. An examination of geographical statistics and other guidebook information is important, but insufficient. Other peoples and cultures

have an inner story to share that our preparation should enable us to receive. Before your trip become acquainted with the culture you will visit using every resource available to you. Check with your local library, museum, college, or university for music and art work of the area you will visit. Discover the customs, traditions, and faith experiences of the people, and the roles of women, children, and elders. Use more than just your head—perhaps there is a restaurant nearby that features similar food. You may be surprised at the resources out there! Explore the questions on the Cultural Norms Worksheet (page 45).

Keep an open mind during all of your pre-trip findings. Remember that much of what we know in the United States may be the result of research conducted many years ago, or by scientists from a single cultural perspective. Be prepared to learn new and perhaps different information from the contemporary setting, or from people whose experience does not fit the standard image.

When visiting a different place or culture, it is natural to look for similarities to your own culture. You may hear yourself say, "Why, they are no different from the folks back home. They are just like me." While that is an attempt to identify the common humanity that binds us, it often covers an inability to recognize cultural distinctions and singularities. We need to progress from talking about cultural differences and how we must respect them to a lively and active interest in other cultural manifestations.

Reflection is a necessary part of the process, for there are no easy rules. Pinning things down too early and arranging your discoveries into neat models leads to stereotyping and false classifications. For instance, all

Hispanic or Asian cultures are not the same. These cultural groups have many different national or regional sub-groupings. Any attempt to label an observation with the simple designation of Asian or Hispanic can lead to frustration and misunderstanding. Learning about other cultures will necessitate learning new concepts of time and space, as well as new values and attitudes. In most Western nations, including the United States, agreements are determined by literal meanings of words and specific provisions of a contract. In many cultures, it is the meaning and spirit of an agreement and one's commitment to the agreement that is more important. These realities may be operative as you plan with another culture for this experience. You need not change your own concepts, but you should consider the implications of conceptual differences for others and yourself.

To explore some cultural differences, examine the following three scenarios.

- 1) You arrive at the home of a family where you will stay for a few days. After a cordial reception, you retire to your room to unpack your suitcases. After unpacking some of your things, you go for a walk to see the city with a member of the family. When you return to your room, you are startled to see that your belongings seem to have been examined. Some of your personal items have been removed from your suitcase and left on the table. A flashlight you left on the table is missing. What is going on? What, if anything, should you do?

Before images of thievery enter your mind, you should be aware that many cultures throughout the world place a very high value on sharing of material goods. "What's mine is yours" is indeed a way of life and not just a jesting statement. In addition to a concept of sharing, privacy is a concept more pronounced in the United States than in most other countries. A lack of private property and privacy is prevalent throughout the world as the rule rather than the exception.

- 2) In a Latin American culture, you arrange to go to town to buy some things at a local store. The store is crowded and many people are gathered around the salesperson. While you await your turn, you notice that the salesperson is waiting on three or four people at the same time, and that someone who came after you is waited on before you. Other persons still waiting appear not to be disturbed, but you become angry and leave in despair. On the street



you try to talk about this with a friend who is of that culture. He or she does not look you in the eye, rather shifts eyes from side to side. While you are talking, another person approaches you and your friend, and immediately your friend ceases talking to you and begins a conversation with the other person.

Before you regard this as a lack of manners and rude behavior, it is well to know that United States and Canadian cultures and Hispanic American cultures arrange their interpersonal relations differently. The United States is a monochronic culture, while most Latin American countries are polychronic. In the United States most interpersonal relations, whether formal or informal, are carried out in a one-to-one sequence, while in Latin countries several transactions will take place at the same time. While you were waiting your turn in that store, you were actually missing your turn. The friend with the shifting eyes was indeed looking for a newcomer to join your conversation for he did not want to be impolite.

- 3) A Chinese American with excellent credentials is being considered for the position of youth director for your church. He is interviewed by the congregation's personnel committee, but he is not offered the job. Later you hear that he did not get the job because "he was too quiet." Most of the members of your youth group agree with this decision because they need someone who is gregarious and has an outgoing personality.

In Chinese culture, quietness and respect for superiors is considered an important value; therefore, the Chinese American was purposefully quiet in the interview. The personnel committee misinterpreted his quietness as incompetence and non-aggressiveness. If a similar situation should occur, what suggestions could you make to the Chinese American, or to the personnel committee? 🌐 (CGE and UMC)

