

A Template for Cultural Orientation

Considerations for facilitators: Leading an effective cultural orientation requires some training. Teaching others about our own culture is challenging, since most of the culture we embody is tacit or unconscious to us yet very obvious to outsiders. The best facilitator is often an outsider to the culture, or a host national who has lived outside of their home country for a while.

Learning objectives:

- 1) to bring a greater student awareness of what culture is and its impact on the study abroad experience, and
- 2) to increase understanding of some of the patterns and sign posts of the host culture in order to help students navigate, be sensitive to and learn more about their host society.

Time requirements: The topics below could be covered in a minimum of 2 hours, but could also be expanded to a longer, multi-session format.

A Note on Style: Experience shows that making these sessions as interactive as possible yields the best results. Doing activities from the [Intercultural Toolbox](#), getting students to brainstorm and writing their responses on a flip chart, and making it fun in other innovative ways will keep their attention and increase the impact.

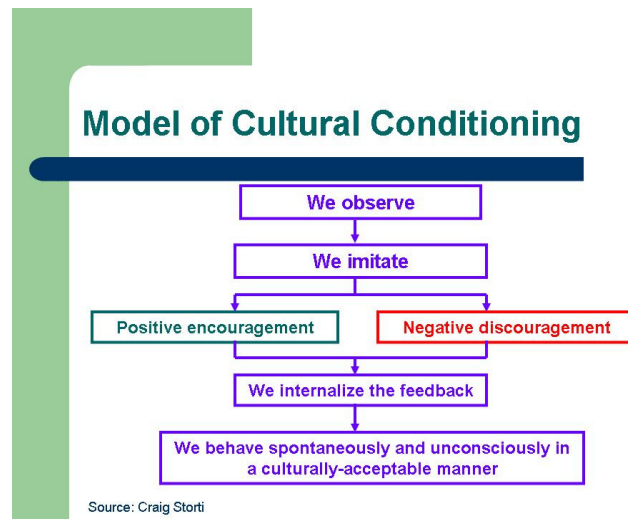
Workshop Plan:

- 1) What is Culture?
- 2) Values and their Effect on Culture
- 3) General Do's and Don'ts of the Host Culture
- 4) Contexts, Zones & Academic Culture
- 5) Non-Verbal Communication
- 6) Cultural Adjustment
- 7) How to Keep Learning on your Own

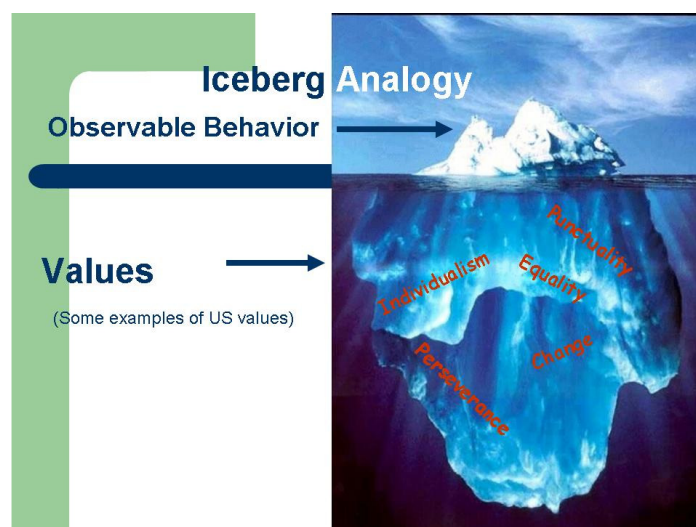
1) **What is culture?** This is a crucial step in preparing the soil in which to plant knowledge about the host culture. Young people often do not have a concept of what culture is and how it might affect them.

a. Discussion of some of the ways that culture can be understood.

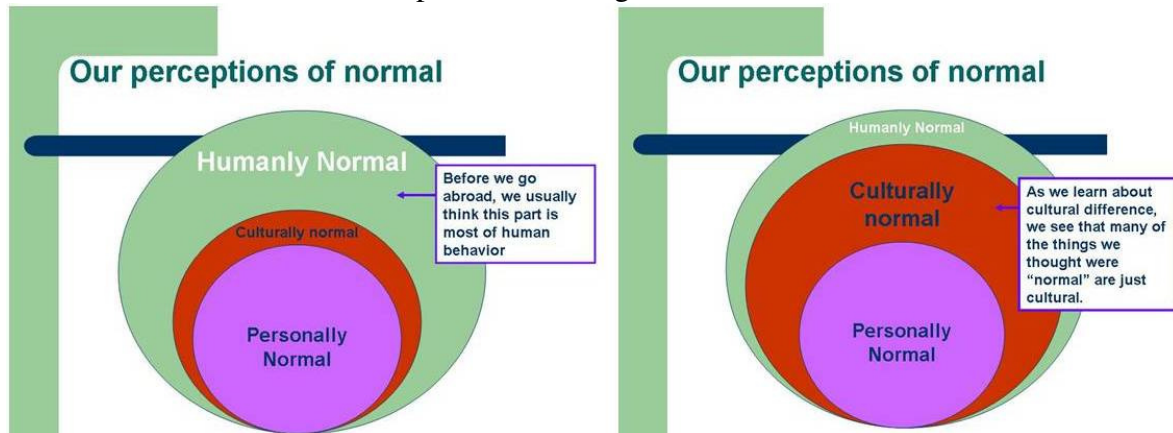
i. **Model of cultural conditioning** – how do we learn our own culture?



- ii. **Culture as a set of lenses** through which we perceive – tacit, subconscious and invisible to us – yet they filter what we see and place meaning on it that may be different from the other culture's perception. Our language and behavior is a code that is sent and received, and may be misunderstood through a different person's lenses.
- iii. **Iceberg analogy of culture**, with behaviors on top, and values, history, etc. below the surface.



- iv. ***Differentiating the universal patterns from the cultural patterns from the personal patterns.*** Most students who have never been abroad may think certain patterns are universally “normal” for all people, but soon find out they are not. Furthermore, viewing the host culture, an outsider cannot tell if a behavior is attributed to a person’s personality or to a larger cultural pattern. Raising the issue with students that there are certain things that are universal (we all eat, for example), certain things that are cultural (US Americans generally eat at 5 – 6 pm), and certain things that are personal (Josh eats at 7 or 8 pm) is an important set of categories for their independent learning.



Note: The facilitator may have other ways of seeing culture and should include them. Accompanying articles can help to give shape to these models and to draw connections between them.

2) Values and their effect on culture

- a. Students should first take a look at their own values (using a tool, such as the Values Chart from Maximizing Study Abroad, attached). They can compare how they vary across their many backgrounds and explore some of the conditioning that led them to have those values.
- b. The facilitator or host national students participating in the orientation can present some of the values of the host culture.
 - i. If there are specific words, phrases or proverbs in the host language that exemplify the core values of the society, they can be an important orienting tool. For example, “Fences make good neighbors” exemplifies US individualism, while the Chinese term “filial piety” demonstrates the respect for one’s elders.
 - ii. Exploring how these values may play out in the students experience is an important step in making this theoretical discussion concrete and real.

3) General Cultural Do’s and Don’ts

- a. The facilitator can prepare a handout of important things to do or to avoid, based on their experience with international students in the past. The list does not have to be exhaustive, but should note the most important things. It is also helpful at this point to connect some of these ‘rules’ to the underlying value system

discussed in Section 2. Students can take this handout and discuss with other host nationals to add more nuances. Ask them to make their own lists.

4) Contexts, Zones and Academic Culture

- a. Societal norms can apply differently based on the context or zone. For example, behavior appropriate in a night club in the US is not appropriate on the campus lawn. Or, it is important to speak softly in a fine restaurant in France, but okay to speak loudly outside. What are some of the contexts or zones that carry either special rules or the absence of rules?
- b. Specifically, what is the culture of the academic setting? What is expected of the student? What is the relationship between the student and the professor? What special rules apply to the classroom?

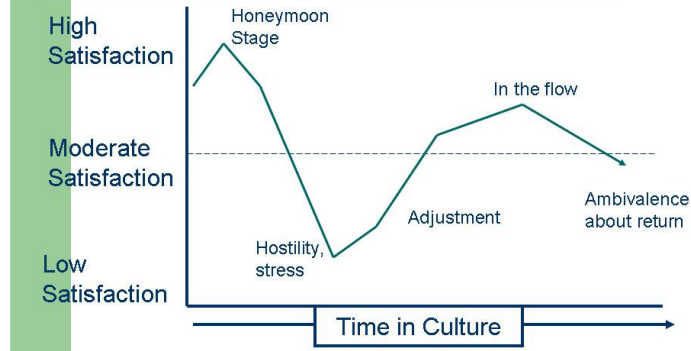
5) Non-Verbal Communication

- a. Edward T. Hall called this the “silent language,” and the generation of cyber-connected students is becoming less and less attuned to it. A discussion of how we read the non-verbal cues of others can be sparked by the following exercise:
 - i. Have students pair off in groups of two and ask them to have a conversation for 30 seconds. During this conversation, ask one of them to tell a story about their arrival and the other to demonstrate non-verbally that they are not listening. After 30 seconds, have them discuss how it felt, what the ‘listener’ was doing, and what non-verbal cues could indicate that they *were* listening.
 - ii. OR, have students get up and walk around and introduce themselves to other students without talking, then debrief on which non-verbal gestures were understood and which were not.
- b. The facilitator can demonstrate some of the non-verbal gestures of the host culture and their meanings. Are there any that are the same gesture in different cultures but with a different meaning?

6) Cultural Adjustment

- a. Discuss the u-curve of cultural adjustment and how settling in to the host culture may have some bumps along the way (see model below). The important thing for students to remember is that they grow from every struggle and that they should receive some of the frustrations as an important opportunity for learning. They can be given a handout so that they remember this lesson in a month when they start to get really depressed.

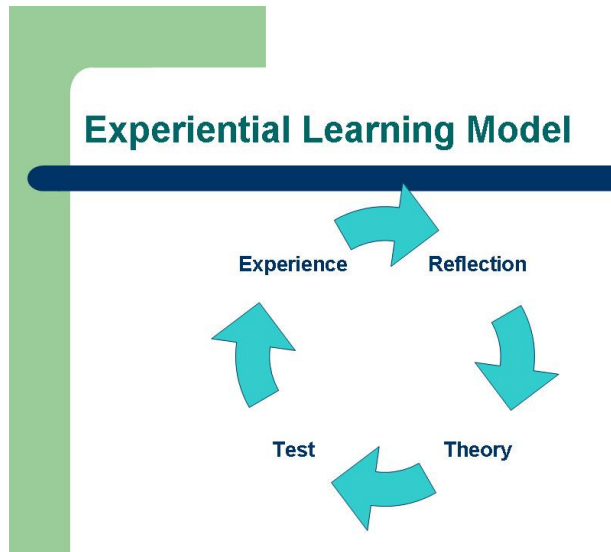
Adjustment U-Curve



7) How to keep learning

- Use your powers of observation, remain open and suspend your judgment to truly pay attention to what is going on culturally.
- Use the experiential learning model: Experience ---> Reflection ----> Theories or explanations ----> Testing, asking questions, observing again ----> Experience...

Experiential Learning Model



- Step out of your comfort zone to voluntarily immerse yourself: get involved with clubs, volunteer, explore the city, take advantage of opportunities offered by the host university, embrace ambiguity and uncertainty.

Some online resources:

Intercultural Toolbox, a collection of activities and workshop plans:
<http://www.unr.edu/oiss/toolbox/toolbox.html>

Maximizing Study Abroad, a companion book for students abroad, as well as a teacher's guide for trainings: <http://www.gloaled.us/plato/maxsa.html>

Suggested Readings:

Avruch, Kevin. 2002. "Part 1: Culture." In *Culture & Conflict Resolution*, United States Institute of Peace Press: Washington, DC, pp. 5 – 21.

Bochner, Stephen. "Culture Shock" in Lonner & Malpass. 1994. *Psychology and Culture*.

Hall, Edward T. 1959. *The Silent Language*. 1976. *Beyond Culture*.

Levine, Robert. 1997. "Living on Event Time." In *A Geography of Time*, Basic Books: New York.

Martin, Judith N. & Nakayama, Thomas. 2004. "The History of the Study of Intercultural Communication," In *Intercultural Communication in Contexts*, McGraw-Hill: New York.

Natadecha-Sponsel, Poranee. 2004. "Individualism as an American Cultural Value." In Hirschberg, Stuart & Hirschberg, Terry. *One World, Many Cultures, 5th Edition*. Pearson Longman: New York. Pp. 481-488.

Paige, Cohen, Kappler, Chi & Lassegard. 2002. "Adjusting," and "Strategies for Developing Intercultural Competence." In *Maximizing Study Abroad: A Students' Guide to Strategies for Language and Culture Learning and Use*. CARLA, University of Minnesota: Minneapolis. Pp. 91 – 111.

Storti, Craig. 2001. "The Problem Explained," and "The Problem Solved." In *The Art of Crossing Cultures, 2nd Edition*, Intercultural Press: Yarmouth, ME.

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