Experiential Activities for Intercultural Learning

Volume 1

H. Ned Seelye
editor

INTERCULTURAL PRESS, INC.

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Introduction

H. Ned Seelye

The Antecedents

Intercultural communication has piqued the interest of trainers, teachers, and scholars in a number of disciplines for some time, although this focus has always been peripheral to the central concerns of their respective academic guilds. More likely than not, they labored in ignorance of what their colleagues in other disciplines and in other organizations were doing to enhance the intercultural skills of students or workshop participants.

One early effort to exchange information was made by David S. Hoopes and Toby S. Frank under the aegis of the Intercultural Communications Network. The Network gathered and informally distributed cross-cultural training materials, intercultural communication course syllabi, and other writings through a now out-of-print series, Readings in Intercultural Communication. Teachers and trainers were asked what objectives they were pursuing, how they organized their training, and what resources they used. The Network also published *Intercultural Sourcebook*, a more systematic survey of cross-cultural training techniques and methodologies, which was another useful vehicle for sharing ideas. This, too, was out-of-print, and Volume I of what will be a two-volume set has recently been reissued, in an extensively revised and expanded edition, by the Intercultural Press, edited by Sandra M. Fowler and Monica Mumford.

The formation of a common meeting place for these colleagues occurred in 1975 with the birth of SIETAR, the Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research (which later became SIETAR International). The first SIETAR conference twenty-one years ago was fascinating in its human dynamics. Many professionals discovered they weren't the only peacock on the lawn, that other colleagues had pretensions of deep (and somewhat exclusive) expertise in things cross-cultural, and that the ideas of their colleagues often sharply differed from their own. This did not necessarily brighten their day. In one large conference session, an American psychologist rose from the floor to talk about ego strength, only to have his own tested by a participant from India who immediately rebutted the American by say-

ing that in many Eastern societies there is no "I" apart from the rest of the universe of people and things. And so it went for several contentious but enormously stimulating days. Ruffled feathers were smoothed by the prevailing eagerness to learn; subsequent meetings have been characterized by an easy acceptance of others and an interest in novel ideas.

Practical-minded trainers and teachers sometimes fidget during long discussions of the many (more than twenty to date) theoretical constructs underpinning cross-cultural training. (An excellent source for many of these discussions is the *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*.) "Give me something practical to use next week," teachers and trainers pleaded.

Early attempts to respond to this call resulted in *Guidelines for Peace Corps Cross-Cultural Training* (1970); *A Manual of Teaching Techniques for Intercultural Education* (1971); and the first book to suggest a specific cross-cultural learning methodology, along with illustrative activities for foreign language teachers, *Teaching Culture* (1974; its revised editions are aimed at intercultural teachers and trainers from any field). Three colleagues provided teachers and trainers, in 1977, with *A Manual of Structured Experiences for Cross-Cultural Learning*. They modeled the general format of their book on a series published by University Associates (now Pfeiffer & Company) for organizational development and human relations trainers.

The Current Volume

This volume, the first in a projected series, provides teachers and trainers on the front lines with a provocative essay that discusses both theory and practice, followed by thirty-two practical activities to engender understanding and skill in one facet or another of intercultural contact. Just being practical, of course, is not enough. The activities selected for this series also are purposeful and economic. That is, they are aimed at parsimoniously advancing a cross-culturally relevant objective.

We try to give parental credit to the creators of the activities included in this series, but the genesis of many training activities is hard to pin down. Many activities are anonymously authored, others are borrowed or "retold" by trainers who fail to footnote the prior authorship, and most of the activities are edited by hundreds of practitioners (who may feel the activity is now theirs). Everyone who uses an activity tends to salt it liberally to his or her own taste. Many of the activities' "originators" are not so much parents as godparents. The editor of this series has himself further edited many of the activities selected for this volume; you, reader, are invited to continue the evolutionary process.

Current Strengths and Weaknesses

The up side of the current state of the art regarding intercultural training activities is that there have evolved over the last twenty or thirty years—and are available in books—hundreds (but not thousands) of mostly discrete experiential learning activities. Most of these have been designed and used by American trainers and teachers who face largely American trainees; generally they aim at short-term adjustment to a country the trainees have not visited. Most of these activities are designed to allow adolescent and adult learners to discover that there are special skills needed to communicate across cultural boundaries. A few even go beyond awakening awareness to developing some handy skills. A few of the activities are

simulations that allow the participant to experience a measure of what it feels like to be in an intercultural situation. The vast majority of the activities focus on understanding that is culturally general in nature. No matter where a participant is headed, geographically speaking, he or she profits from greater awareness of the principles governing accurate communication, rapport, and persuasion in foreign settings.

The very strengths of the current state of the art suggest areas in which teachers and trainers might invest future creative energies.

- A closer analysis of which culturally general knowledge and skills are needed to survive both short- *and* long-term sojourns would aid designers of intercultural learning activities to both sharpen and broaden their coverage.
- Identification of the skills needed by trainees will be honed by taking into account the extent to which role and gender considerations affect the behavior required to get along in a novel cultural setting.
- Theory with implications for intercultural communication is generated by a number of disciplines. Many of the current applications to the intercultural field have been enriched by theory from the fields of psychology and organizational development; some come from anthropology and sociology. Where are the learning activities based on social science models from linguistics, economics, history, and political science, and models from the sciences such as sociobiology and human genetics? Perhaps models useful for understanding the ebb and flow, the warp and woof of intercultural communication will emerge from physics, as investigators seek patterns in events that until recently have been considered random (e.g., chaos theory). The field of pedagogy, one would suspect, would be a promising source of learning models. Where are the activities based on non-Western philosophies? Do Tao and Zen suggest any apt intercultural-learner activities?
- Activities that feature the role of *language* (and not just English) in communicating with host nationals are now largely ignored by the extant intercultural activities. Would activities along these lines be helpful?
- Current learning objectives too often are pie-in-the-sky, macro goals, rather than distinct and succinct, narrowly focused learning objectives (preferably student-centered) that contribute a strategic building block rather than attempt the whole edifice at once in a 40-minute exercise.
- Most of the current learning activities are built around one or more incidents of cross-cultural misunderstanding. This "critical-incident" approach (whether in role-playing skits, case studies, simulations, or whatever vehicle), involving as it does the participant in actively finding the cause of the misunderstanding, has been demonstrated by social psychologists (e.g., Harry Triandis) to offer advantages over traditional approaches such as reading a book about the culture. More research into the short-term *and* long-term effectiveness of various training approaches in meeting their objectives could be a big help to practitioners who currently have to rely on participants' immediate satisfaction with the training for evaluative feedback.
- Adjusting to life in a specific place requires skill in a number of idiosyncratic behaviors. Where are the culturally specific training activities?

- Where are the activities to reduce domestic interethnic, interracial, religious, class, and gender conflict, activities that take cognizance of the particular history and psychosocial dynamics of the targeted groups?
- Do we have enough activities for people with varying learning styles? The "comfortable" (i.e., traditional) learning style in most of the world is a deductive, pre-Deweyan, lecture-rote-memorization approach. When trainers or teachers face learners *in* other cultural settings, or *from* other cultural settings, is there a need to modify how we present experiential activities? Do the activities themselves need revision? Do we need more activities that focus on the processing of visual images or nonverbal communication? It may be worth noting that part of the popularity of adult experiential activities in the United States is that they contrast refreshingly with the more formal presentations of knowledge and skills that we all experienced (with varying degrees of success) in secondary school and college.
- Most children engage in intercultural communication, if not in their neighborhoods, then at school. They also accompany their parents on multinational sojourns. Besides the University of Denver's Center for Teaching International Relations, who is developing training activities for preadolescents?
- Most current intercultural activities are highly derivative. We need more innovative activities. (In this regard, it is a sign of professionalism to acknowledge authors of prior activities that may have stimulated the creation of the present version of their experiential learning activity.)

Our toolbox of intercultural learning activities may not yet be full.

Call for Learning Activities and Format Considerations

Submissions for future volumes are welcomed and should be addressed to the Intercultural Press. They should follow the general format of the current volume. We are especially looking for activities that focus on building intercultural skills and that are new and based on up-to-date theory (no more variations on R. Garry Shirts's wonderfully successful *BaFá BaFá* [Simile II, 1973], please), and for activities that are fun to do. Activities developed by trainers in and for non-Western societies will be looked upon with special grace and gratitude as will those dealing with multicultural and diversity issues in any country.

The format in which the learning units are cast contributes to their usefulness, and we will appreciate user feedback. The units need to be brief while avoiding being cryptic. They need to spell out the linear steps involved. This Betty Crocker approach revolutionized cooking and we think the intercultural learning tools this approach provides can be useful to teachers and trainers, too. This takes nothing away from the artistry of teaching. Sheila Ramsey's essay that precedes this volume's learning activities forcefully highlights the pivotal role of the inspired teacher-trainer.

The current link between theory and practice is a bit shaky. More often than not, theory, if mentioned at all, is described incompletely and cryptically. (Succinct is in, cryptic is out.) For example, there are many theories of ethnocentrism (see LeVine and Campbell 1972), yet activities to reduce ethnocentrism seldom seem to be tied to any one identifiable theory. A paragraph that provides the theoretical setting and rationale for the author's learning unit enhances the presentation.

There is a continuous need to identify and update resources that practitioners may find useful. These resources include both basic theory and other sources of practical training units with compatible objectives. Complete bibliographical data is necessary (future submitters please take note). The reader should not have to go to the library to identify references properly. The author of the activity provides that service.

Virtually all learning units need a follow-up or debriefing section at the end. It is very helpful when this procedure is carefully considered and spelled out in detail.

Trainer tips are helpful, a brief note by the designer of the activity sharing information he or she gained in using the activity with flesh-and-blood people.

Finally, the activity's usefulness is greatly enhanced when any instructional materials needed to do the activity are provided as handouts.

In this volume, we have tried to move closer to our realizable goal of bringing good intercultural learning activities to trainers and teachers. We are excited by the activities selected for inclusion in this volume. A lot of interesting stuff is going on out there. Sometimes the skills it takes to create an exciting, purposeful activity that blooms in the trainee's mind and heart and, at the same time, has sharp objectives and stated theoretical implications or limitations, do not comfortably coexist in the same curriculum developer. Maybe a little collaboration between engagingly charismatic and creative teacher-trainers and those who are less demonstrative, more scholarly-oriented, research-minded types, can spark synergy.

David S. Hoopes, editor-in-chief of Intercultural Press, and Toby S. Frank, president of Intercultural Press, provided invaluable assistance in getting this volume ready for press.

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Creating a Context: Methodologies in Intercultural Teaching and Training

Sheila Ramsey

Introduction

> In today's highly interdependent world, individuals and nations can no longer resolve many of their problems by themselves. We need one another.
>
> —The 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet

As a formalized field of study, intercultural communication is barely twenty-five years old. The organization representing this field, the International Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research, celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 1994. Twenty-five years ago it was rare to find an intercultural communication course taught at the university level. Today university students select among intercultural programs and institutes; the choices are broad, varied, and of high quality. Clients in corporations, health care, or government who seek consultation or training in intercultural matters are also faced with the opportunity for choice.

This rapid proliferation of variety and sophistication in the field asks us to reconsider the unique theoretical perspectives at its core. Such reflection upon essentials of effective intercultural interaction is not simply "nice," it is critical in determining what this field has to offer as we approach a new milennium.

In this volume containing methods for intercultural work, we first reexamine the very *decisions* we make about methodologies. This process of looking anew can bring greater consciousness to our decisions, so that both our creation and our use of methodologies best serve the intercultural learning we wish to facilitate.

To begin, what is meant by "methodology"? In this context, it is an intentionally constructed, time-bounded event meant to provide an opportunity for intercultural learning. In the development of intercultural communication as a discipline, several

common methodological forms have emerged for teaching and training. These include the *case study*, the *critical incident*, the *culture assimilator*, the *role play*, and the *simulation*. In addition, as this collection illustrates, many highly innovative, free-form activities and exercises focus learning around specific objectives for specific audiences.

Today, there are hundreds of learning activities expressly written for intercultural audiences, with thousands more adaptable for such use. These, then, are the tools of our trade. Yet we can sharpen the discernment which guides our decisions about whether to use a particular method as is, whether to modify it, or whether to create an entirely new method to fit particular situations.

Taking a Fresh Look

Years of effort and experience have brought us to this moment when our toolbox is relatively full. But we also know that perceptions have been subtly shifting about the role of "a method" in facilitating intercultural learning. It has become too easy to be mechanical, to believe that a certain method will produce predictable desired outcomes, and thus to see our role as one of picking and choosing. From such a perspective, it is easy to believe that the magic and life of a training program lie in the choice of just the right method for the learning objective and audience.

Methodologies do impart flavor and distinction. But there is no life in a method itself. The understandings and the very spirit that enter a training program, a classroom, or a consultation session do not lie in a direct line between objectives, method, and design. Learning is a dynamic, cocreative process which comes alive in the interaction of the leader with the participants. Such interaction occurs not only within the boundaries set by content, but by the overall purpose of the program as it aligns with specific learning objectives and methodology. A skilled leader remembers this alignment with a larger purpose and consciously selects and uses a methodology rather than being used by it.

Just as a leader works with participants, so one works with a chosen method: the place of cocreation and spontaneity is of utmost importance. One can be continually surprised by what is revealed even if the particular method has been used a thousand times. To the degree that we wish clients to integrate and apply their learning in daily life, we can remember that we are engaged in facilitating living events. Our methods are more inspiring and motivating as we acknowledge that, at its essence, our work is a creative act.[1] In this way, our methodologies are realigned to enlighten and enliven, rather than direct, our acts of creation.

To reexamine the decisions made about the methods we use, it is helpful to explore several areas. These include (1) some of the basic tenets of intercultural communication, which serve as filters through which we construct and implement our work, (2) selected aspects of the larger design process, and (3) our roles as professionals facilitating intercultural learning.

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[1] I am especially indebted to graduate work I did, in 1974–1976, with Mary Lou Smith, of the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, University of Pittsburgh. Her concept of "emergent design" continues to heavily influence my work.

The Shape of Our World

Let us begin with the well-known analogy of the iceberg. What is "under the waterline" is of more importance, as one seeks to adapt to an unfamiliar culture, than what can be seen upon first encounter. What then is under the waterline of the intercultural field itself? What is the metatheory or metaperspective from which the field of intercultural communication generates? What are the processes that are constant throughout the consulting, training, and education carried out in the name of intercultural communication?

Submerged Assumptions

Culture. The shape of our world grows out of the way the major actor, culture, is conceptualized. Culture is a frame of reference consisting of learned patterns of behavior, values, assumptions, and meaning, which are shared to varying degrees of interest, importance, and awareness with members of a group; culture is the story of reality that individuals and groups value and accept as a guide for organizing their lives.

This definition refers to what is called culture with a small *c*, not culture with a big *C*. The latter, objective culture, refers to the traditional view of culture as theater, dance, music, and art. Small *c* culture, subjective culture, has no existence except in human behavior. It has to do with how we create meaning in our lives and how we behave according to the meanings we create. Patterns of behavior and values are learned and passed through generations and across groups. They are widely shared and not frequently overtly discussed. Simultaneously they provoke emotional reactions when violated, are most obvious when in contrast, can be quite paradoxical, and may be both accepted and rejected at the same time.

Culture is an abstraction; it cannot actually be seen or touched. The analogy of the wind is helpful in grasping the abstract and secondhand nature of this concept. One cannot see the wind. So how do we know it is a windy day? We see a flag moving, we hear leaves of a tree rubbing against each other, we feel a pressure on our skin. The name we give the difference or the feeling is "wind." So too with culture. We see people acting in agreed-upon ways in the face of similar situations. We hear people using the same sounds in reference to common objects or experiences. We notice people moving their bodies in certain ways—making choices in their lives about where to live, what to eat, how to learn, how to work and love—in response to similar events and experiences, and we say "Oh, those people belong to the same culture."

We must remember that culture is an abstraction produced by thought. The effects of forgetting this are nicely illustrated by John C. Condon (1993) as he speaks about thirteen reasons to avoid the word "culture." He suggests that as culture becomes a thing, we begin to believe that "culture is a place or a place one comes from." We also can believe that "if I understand your culture, I will understand you." In the first case, culture is thought to be external to people. In the second case, a rigid definition of what a member of *X* culture must be like can be to the detriment

of a person who identifies with *X* but is not at all like the popular image.[2] For example, in a workshop addressing methodologies, participants had just finished a movement exercise which allowed them to develop an in-depth intuitive sense of their partner from another national culture. In the discussion, a young woman asked, "I feel like I understand my partner in a way I didn't before, but what does it tell me about her culture?" The importance of getting to know her partner was less valuable than her search for greater understanding of an abstraction.

In studying culture we are studying the common rules, the common assumptions, the common values that are the foundations of the external behavior which we can see, touch, and feel. What function does this abstraction of culture have in our lives? We feel a sense of belonging, a sense of inclusion, for there are others like us. We have a frame of reference, a point of view, through which to look at and make sense of the world; we receive reinforcement for this way of looking at and being in the world. We have guidelines about how to translate our meanings into action. We look around and see that we are not crazy or mad in the choices we make; our lives are structurally coherent and make sense.

Intercultural Communication. What then of intercultural communication? The second major actor that gives shape to our world is the concept of communication. A most simple, elegant, and well-accepted definition arises from the work of the late Dean Barnlund. Communication is the creation of meaning. We as humans are meaning-making creatures. To quote Dr. Barnlund:

> It is impossible to exist without acting; impossible to act without interpreting.... The world is possibility, no more, no less. We are born into an environment so varied, so complex, so devoid of inherent meaning as to overwhelm the senses. Yet no matter how chaotic it seems, we must make it intelligible.[3]

Barnlund also suggests that any communicative act, the act of making meaning, is contextual, irreversible, and not repeatable; it does not depend upon anyone being intentional and, in actuality, we cannot *not* communicate!

Intercultural communication becomes the creation of shared meanings among people who are more different than they are alike. The communication scholar Young Yun Kim states this succinctly:

> The crux of intercultural communication that distinguishes it from the rest of the (communication) field is the relatively high degree of difference in the experiential backgrounds of the communicators due to cultural differences. An underlying assumption here is that individuals who belong to the same culture generally share greater commonality (or homogeneity) in their overall experiential backgrounds than those from different cultures.[4]

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[2] John C. Condon, "Some Reasons to Avoid the Word 'Culture'," personal communication, Tokyo, Japan (December 1993).

[3] Dean Barnlund, "Toward an Ecology of Communication," in *Rigor and Imagination: Essays in the Legacy of Gregory Bateson*, edited by J. A. Weakland and C. Wilder (New York: Praeger, 1982), 74.

[4] Young Yun Kim, "Intercultural Communication Competence: A Systems-Theoretic View," in *Readings on Communicating with Strangers: An Approach to Intercultural Communication*, edited by W. B. Gudykunst and Y. Y. Kim (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992), 371-78.

The Domain of Difference. In intercultural communication, not only is difference our domain, but it is our avenue into understanding. We make the assumption that we can best find our shared humanness by examining, allowing, and respecting differences. Indeed, in intercultural situations we know that people must be allowed to be different from each other. To the degree that a focus is placed on similarity, there is a good chance that the other can only be seen through comparison with and likeness to ourselves.

Evidence of the importance of this assumption can be seen in the distinctions made in our field between sympathy and empathy. We are sympathetic as we try to understand another by putting self in the unfamiliar shoes: "I know how you feel because I have been there too" is obviously based upon a process of projected similarity in trying to imagine how the other feels based upon one's own experience. So emerges the golden rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Empathy, on the other hand, involves doing one's best to imagine another person's situation without projecting self into it. We try to enter into the others' experience more purely from their point of view. Thus emerges the silver rule: "Do unto others as they would have you do unto them." This suggests attention to listening and the capability to identify and monitor the habit of projection. Such definitions point to the assumption, shared widely in this field, that another person becomes fully human to the extent that we are able to let the other be different from ourselves.[5]

Interaction. In addition to being based on particular definitions of culture and communication and to building understanding through a valuing of difference, this field is characterized by attention to interaction among peoples who are more different than alike. Cross-cultural comparisons may supply part of the information necessary to support people who are learning to live and work in new situations. From the comparative perspective, intercultural communication is about identifying cultural differences of the *other* and comparing/contrasting such differences with *self*; for example, how do Japanese make decisions in a corporate setting? However, the heart of our work lies in the exploration of how people adapt and adjust when directly encountering others who practice unfamiliar processes of perceiving, valuing, and behaving in the world. From the interactive perspective, one learns how to participate in decision making *with* Japanese in corporate settings.

This certainly does involve the learning of a great deal of culturally specific information. In educational and consultative work, much time and attention are given to learning culturally specific knowledge and then applying such knowledge in contextually defined interactions with those who are from different backgrounds and experience. The focus on interacting with those who are culturally different is supported by research about predictors of effective intercultural performance and how to become competent in another culture.[6]

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[5] Milton Bennett, "Overcoming the Golden Rule: Sympathy and Empathy," in *Communication Yearbook 3*, edited by D. Nimmo (Washington, DC: International Communication Association, 1979).

[6] Richard Wiseman and J. Koester, eds, *Intercultural Communication Competence* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1993).