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Do's and Don'ts of conducting classes in a cross-cultural environment

Let's start with a question: is conducting classes in a cross-cultural environment different from conducting "regular" classes? This leads us to the next question: What is a "regular" class? For some of you, the regular class may mean cross-cultural, but for others, it will be the class that consists only of students from the same country, usually the country from which you are from.

According to my experience as a lecturer and cross-cultural trainer, the answer to the first question is: it is usually more similar than we think. Why? Because people from the same country, with the same nationality, tend to have different behaviors. It may be not to the extent as in a multinational group but there will be still some differences.

Due to this "Do's and Don'ts of conducting classes in cross-cultural environment" is a mini-guide not only for those of you who teach students from different countries but also for those of you who teach in less culturally diverse classes.

I divided this mini-guide into five parts: I. What is culture?; II. Cross-cultural competences; III. Communication; IV. Cross-cultural activities; V. Further readings. In the mini-guide, you will find Individual activities and Group activities. I encourage you to use them in your everyday work with students. You will also find links to additional materials. Enjoy 😊

Part I. What is culture?

This mini-guide aims at developing competencies related to conducting classes in a cross-cultural environment. To gain this competence it is crucial to develop cross-cultural competencies, enhance cross-cultural awareness by increasing self-awareness of individual cultural preferences, and last but not least enhance communication skills.

One of the first things we should do is to define the very crucial term for this mini-guide. The term is... I'm sure you already know. Yes, of course, it is **culture**. Culture has so many definitions. We could spend here hours and hours by naming them all.

Individual activity.

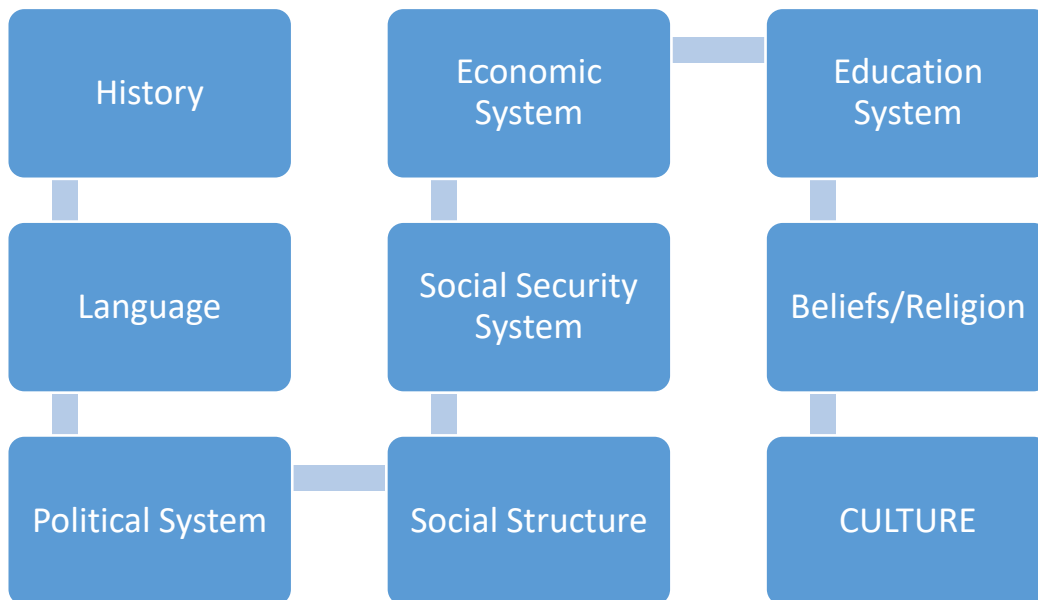
Write down your definition of culture. You can write more than one. You can also ask your colleagues/friends/family members about their definition of culture. Are they similar or different? What is the reason for it?

I would like to suggest my two favorite definitions of culture:

- according to [Geert Hofstede](#), culture is “the programming of the human mind by which one group of people distinguishes itself from another group”.
- [Pellegrino Riccardi](#), defines culture as “accepted and familiar behavior”. He also emphasizes that “culture is the way we do things around here”.

I’m quite sure that you will agree with the statement that culture is like... an [iceberg](#) or an onion. Culture has some aspects that are visible and others that are not. Those which are not visible can only be suspected, imagined, or intuited. It takes time to look “below the water” or discover “inner layers”.

Why it is so? Why do cultures differ from one another? There are several factors, below you may find some of them.



Each one of us has some basic assumptions we believe, it can be “trust”, “truth” or “ethos of work”. Each basic assumption has an impact on the norms and values we believe in. Finally, it also has an impact on our behavior. The above-presented factors have an impact on the basic assumptions, norms, and values and finally on our behavior.

Group Activity.

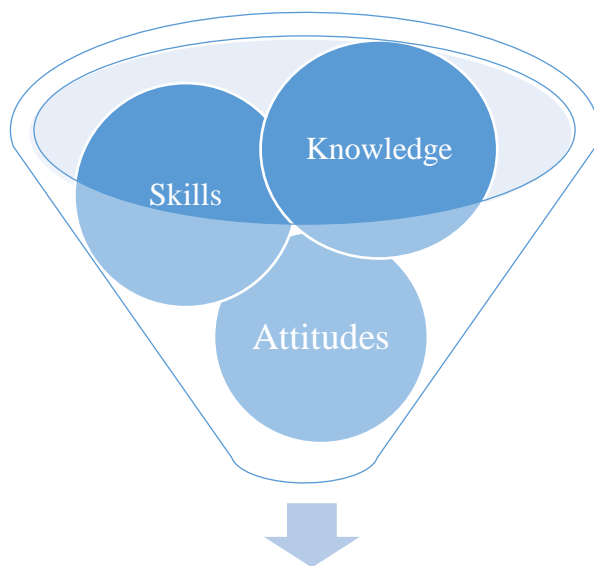
You can use the above graph as a classroom activity. Ask your student to work in groups, of 3-5 people, it may depend on the size of the class. Group work can last 5-10 minutes. Ask them to write down: Why cultures differ from one another. After this time, it is time for you to lead moderate discussion.

You can also invite your students for the second round of group activity and ask them to write down their basic assumptions. First, let them work individually and then ask them to discuss in groups. Next step, again it is your turn to lead moderate discussion.

Part II. Cross-cultural competences

Cross-cultural competence is a sensibility to detect and manage culture-related factors. Developing cross-cultural competencies is an important part of developing career skills for most of us, due to the nature of academic work in current times. It is not only about working with students but also with other colleagues from work. We are highly encouraged to be part of international projects, publications, and international teaching programs.

It is important not to simplify the definition of cross-cultural competencies only to culture-specific **knowledge**, grasp of global issues and trends, and cultural self-awareness. There are also **skills** and **attitudes**. Let's start by explaining what I mean by skills: listening, observing, evaluating, using patience, and perseverance. It is crucial to add one more: viewing the world. Now, it is time for attitudes: respect (valuing other cultures), openness (withholding judgment), curiosity (viewing difference as a learning opportunity), and discovery (tolerance for ambiguity). You can find more on this topic: Darla K. Deardorff, [Identification and Assessment of Intercultural Competence as a Student Outcome of Internationalization](#).



Cross-cultural competence

Once you recognize that intercultural competence goes beyond language and knowledge about other cultures, it is time to explain it to your students. I remember that this mini-guide is not about delivering courses on cross-cultural competencies but about conducting classes in cross-cultural environments.

But once you will convince yourself and your students about what cross-cultural competencies are about. I'm sure that your teaching experience will be smoother.

To develop cross-cultural competencies I encourage you to use the [Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity \(DMIS\)](#). What DMIS is about? It is a framework developed by Milton J. Bennett, to explain how people experience and engage cultural differences.

Bennett proposed two terms **ethnocentrism** and **ethnorelativism** to describe the two opposing ends. Once you develop your cross-cultural competencies, you move from avoiding differences (ethnocentrism) to seeking differences (ethnorelativism). When you are at the ethnocentric stage, you see your beliefs and values as natural, correct, and unquestioningly. The way you live is the best way to live. When you have a more ethnorelative view you may see the world differently. You acknowledge how your cultural beliefs, values, and ways of living represent only one of many possible and acceptable ways of living.

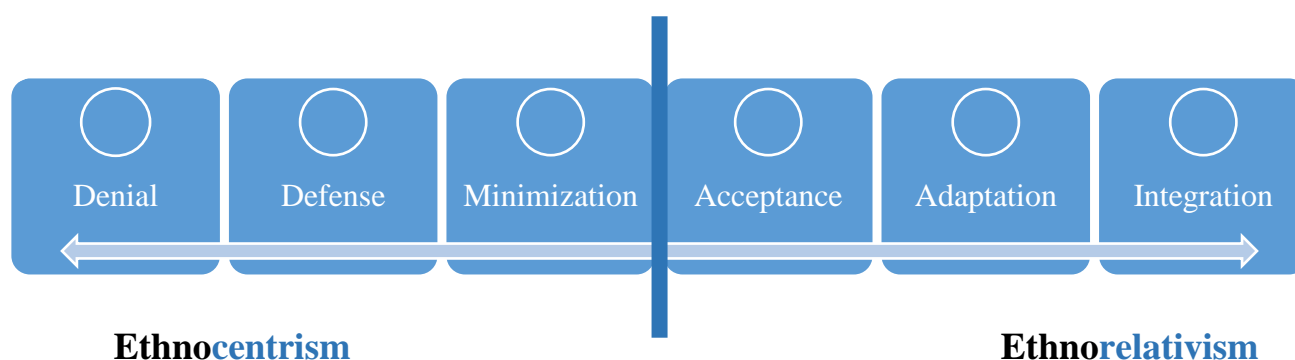
To put it in a nutshell: (i) from denial to defense: the person acquires an awareness of the difference between cultures; (ii) from defense to minimization: negative judgments are depolarized, and the person is introduced to similarities between cultures; (iii) from minimization to acceptance: the subject grasps the importance of intercultural difference; (iv) from acceptance to adaptation: exploration and research into the other culture begins; (v) from adaptation to integration: subject develops empathy towards the other culture.

DMIS develops an individual's ability to have a more complex experience of otherness and constitutes what Bennett termed **intercultural sensitivity**.

Individual activity.

Where do you stand on this scale? Take a moment to read this about it. Keep in mind that each stage reflects our experience of difference. Being at a higher stage does not mean you are a better person, just as being at a lower stage does not mean you are a lesser person.

Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)



Group Activity.

Divide your students into groups, of 3-5 people, it may depend on the size of the class. Step I. Students work individually. They should match statements (two for each stage) with the stage of DMIS. Time: 5-10 minutes. Step II. Students discuss the outcome of their work. Time: 10-15 minutes. Next step, again it is your turn to lead moderate discussion.

Denial Stage	Defense Stage	Minimization Stage
Acceptance Stage	Adaption Stage	Integration Stage

- All big cities are the same—lots of buildings, too many cars, McDonald's
- While sometimes I feel marginal in groups, I can move in and out of them with relative ease
- The key to getting along in any culture is to just be yourself—authentic and honest
- I know they're trying hard to adapt to my style, so it's fair that I try to meet them halfway
- The more I understand this culture, the better I get at the language
- These people don't value life the way we do
- I always try to study about a new culture before I go there
- In an intercultural world, everyone needs to have an intercultural mindset
- I have this intuitive sense of other people, no matter what their culture
- People in other cultures are different in ways I hadn't thought of before
- With my experience, I can be successful in any culture without any special effort— I never experienced culture shock
- I wish I could give up my cultural background and be one of these people

Where to find correct answers? Just click [here](#) 😊

Part III. Communication

Communicating across cultures together with the enhancement of cross-cultural competencies are essential tools for conducting classes in cross-cultural environments.

First, let's talk about verbal communication. There are several styles of verbal communication. Which one is better? Which one is correct? Those questions can be answered with one word: "None". To enhance your communication skills to conduct the class in a multicultural environment more efficiently, you need to be aware of different communication styles. You have to have this knowledge to be able to decode your communication style and then identify the communication styles of your students. Hear what the person is saying; not what you expect them to say.

Communication patterns
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ High context: Relying on non-direct communication. Appreciating the importance of gestures, body posture, voice, and context. ➤ Low context: Reliance on explicit communication Preference for clear and detailed instructions.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Direct Communication: During conflict or the need to communicate a difficult message, clearly conveying the message despite the risk of offending someone. ➤ Indirect Communication: When in conflict or needing to communicate a difficult message, maintain a pleasant, cordial relationship despite the risk of misunderstanding.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Affectivity Showing emotion in communication. Creating and maintaining personal and social connections is essential. ➤ Neutrality: Emphasizing brevity, precision, and distance in communication.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Formality - strict adherence to protocols and rituals. ➤ Informality - preference for intimacy and spontaneity.

Individual activity.

Which communication styles do you represent? Please write down your preferences. Next, ask your colleague from work to tell you which communication style in his/her opinion you represent. Do you agree or maybe disagree with your colleague? Think how it can affect your ability to conduct class in cross-cultural environment.

Let's have a closer look at the direct and indirect communication styles.

Direct communication:

- The speaker communicates true intentions directly in the verbal message.
- Messages don't have an underlying meaning.
- Criticism is expressed usually openly and freely - it is not taken personally.
- Transparency and clarity are crucial.
- Problems tend to be solved more rapidly if open and frank discussion is encouraged.
- Feedback both negative and positive is given directly.

Indirect communication:

- True intentions are not verbally expressed but come from context or non-verbal communication.
- Indirect speakers usually don't make a direct statement if it may cause tension or conflict.
- Being polite and "saving face" – avoid hurting another person's self-esteem is more important than giving an honest answer.
- Indirect confrontation may also rely upon stories, metaphors, or images.
- Feedback both negative and positive is given indirectly.

Group Activity.

Ask students to work in pairs.

Step I. Time for this activity: 5 minutes. Show to students sentence: "I would never tell a friend that I didn't like her dress. Instead, I would tell her I liked her shoes, omitting reference to her dress." Ask them to decide if it is a direct or indirect style of communication. Ask them also to explain their decision.

Answer: Indirect style. You may add to the sentence: "She would understand that I didn't like her dress because I didn't mention it".

Step II. Time for this activity: 10 minutes. Ask students to match the sentences to the direct or indirect communication style. Sentences: "This is nowhere close to done."; "I was a bit surprised."; "It's an interesting idea."; "I don't know how to do that."; "We're almost there."; "I was upset."; "I don't like this idea."; "I'll try my best." Please ask also students to decode the most commonly used phrases for direct and indirect styles of communication. Next step, again it is your turn to lead moderate discussion.

Answer:

Indirect communication: "I was a bit surprised."; "It's an interesting idea."; "We're almost there."; "I'll try my best."

Direct communication: "I was upset."; "I don't like this idea."; "This is nowhere close to done."; "I don't know how to do that."

Now it is time for non-verbal communication, which is about especially space, facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, but not only! Please have a look at the graphics below. Please be careful when using or decoding non-verbal communication. It can be very tricky!



Eye contact



Gestures



Facial expressions

Types of non-verbal communication



Physical contact



Posture



Personal space

Individual activity.

How do you feel about non-verbal communication? Is it an important part of your communication patterns? Write down your answers. Next, ask your students or colleagues from work about your non-verbal communication style. Do you agree with their opinion? Think how it can affect your ability to conduct class in cross-cultural environment.

Group Activity.

Ask students to work in groups. 3-5 people, it may depend on the size of the class. Time for activity: 10-15 minutes. Show them two graphics which you can find below. Ask them to decode behavior that is seen as inappropriate. Why is it so? Next, ask students about their funny stories which are related to non-verbal communication across cultures.



Answer: it is quite common among some Koreans to close their eyes during conversation. They can fully focus on the verbal communication of their colleagues. It may be seen as rude by some other nations. Are they sleeping? The second graphic deals with greetings styles. In Korea, people tend to bow to greet someone, especially if someone is senior to them. Waving hands may be seen as polite by some Koreans.

Source of graphics: [Ugly Koreans Ugly Americans \(Cultural and behavioral differences between Koreans and Americans\) by Min Byoung-chul.](#)

Additional Resources

- [Top Ten Tips for... Effective Cross-Cultural Communication](#)
- [How To Improve Cross-Cultural Communication in the Workplace](#)
- [How Do People Develop Cross-Cultural Communication Skills?](#)
- [5 Key Strategies for Effective Cross-Cultural Communication](#)

Part IV. Cross-cultural activities

I would like to propose a few activities, you can use them both as ice-breakers or activities during the class. You may find it useful while conducting class in a cross-cultural environment.

Number 1. Facts and myths about selected countries. Exercises related to the cards designed by Yang Liu. Yang Liu's pictogram book series "Meet" is a personal project about differences in life in various aspects and contexts. [East meets West](#). Task: find matching cards, and think about what kind of behavior they represent.

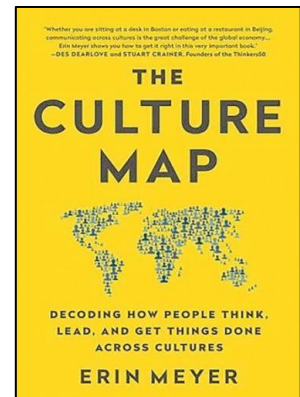
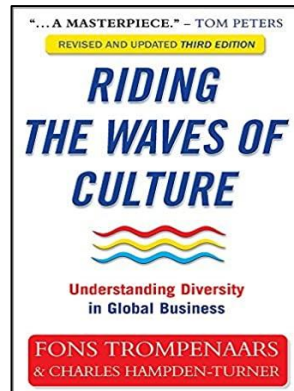
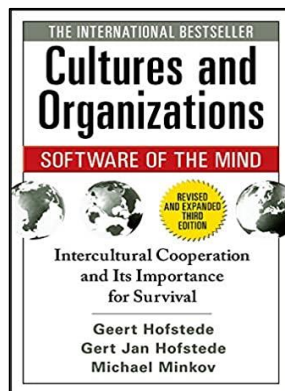
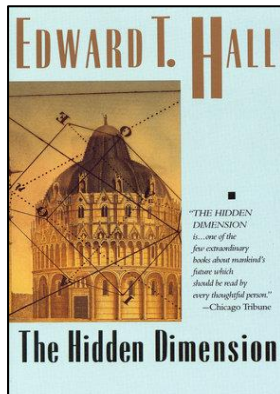
Number 2. Are you ignorant about the world? Exercises related to the survey conducted by [Gapminder Foundation](#). You can find the quiz on their website or you can click [here](#). You can also choose a quiz related to a [particular country](#). Task: take a quiz and discuss about results. You ask about generalization or stereotypes.

Number 3. Storytelling, exercise based on story cubes. It depends on which cubes you will choose☺ There is a variety of options, just click [here](#). Task: tell a story based on the story cubes.

Number 4. Dictionary, create your cross-cultural dictionary. It is a group activity. Task: define each word in one sentence. You may choose any word you want to. Some tips: responsibility, trust, honesty, urgency, flexibility, teamwork, engagement, deadline.

Part V. Further readings

Top cross-cultural researchers:



Useful website:

- [Hofstede Insights](#)
- [Trompenaars Hampden-Turner](#)
- [Erin Meyer](#)

You will find there a lot of useful tips on how to conduct classes in a cross-cultural environment. Please remember that developing cross-cultural competencies is a never-ending journey ☺ Enhancing your skills will allow you to conduct classes in a cross-cultural environment more efficiently.