

Tutoring Across Cultures

Tutoring or working with students from a culture different from your own means that you will have to address cultural differences as well as difficulties with the subject matter. People cannot be separated from their cultural background. Often people make judgments according to their own behaviors, attitudes, and language usage without realizing that one set of cultural norms does not always apply to another culture.

What assumptions do you make about people based on the way they look or dress? Do you have stereotypes about people from certain cultures? Has anyone ever misjudged you based on your ethnicity, race, or culture? Has anyone ever been offended by or misunderstood something you've said, and you didn't know why? How close do you sit to your tutees? Do you look people directly in the eye when you are speaking to them or look away? Is it good to ask a lot of questions in class? How does it change a tutorial session when a woman tutors a man and vice versa? What about when a younger person tutors an older person and vice versa? Have you ever misjudged someone or been misjudged as "smart," "slow," "stubborn," "lazy," "resistant," or "shy?"

You will become a more effective tutor if you try to understand the influence of culture on communication and learning. The purpose of this section is to develop a deeper awareness of how cultural differences may affect tutoring.

What is Culture?

The dictionary says that culture is the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought. Culture is a neutral term, neither good nor bad, and refers to the broadest conception about the learned knowledge that humans use to fulfill their needs and wants. This is a system that includes shared thought, speech, action, customary beliefs, attitudes, and behavior. It refers to the collective historical patterns, values, societal arrangements, manners, ideas, and ways of living that people have used to order their society. It is comprised of all those things we learn as part of growing up including language, religion, beliefs about economic and social relations, political organization, and the thousands of "Do's and Don'ts" society deems important that we know to become a functioning member of that group.

Culture is not a simple thing! It can involve:

- ethnicity
- parents' education
- country of origin
- region of origin
- gender
- religion
- economic status
- language(s)
- sexual orientation
- race
- learning style
- disability
- intercultural or multicultural background
- style of dress
- group traditions
- and more...

Intercultural Communication Tips

Tutoring across cultures is a new experience for many people. Intercultural communication can be a dynamic and creative affair, but occasionally due to the inability to interpret people correctly it can be a challenge. Building an understanding of other people's cultures, their communication styles, and behaviors can go a long way in improving relationships and becoming a more successful tutor in an intercultural environment.

The following intercultural communication tips are provided to help improve your intercultural communication skills. You will probably notice that many of these are the same tips that will help to improve a tutor's communication skills in any environment.

- **Be Patient:** Working in an intercultural environment can be frustrating. Things may not get done as expected, communication can be tiring, and behavior may be different from what you expect. Patience with yourself and others helps move beyond such issues to a successful tutoring session.
- **Ask Questions:** When you don't understand something or want to know why someone has behaved in a certain way, simply ask. Listen to the response; don't assume you know the answers. Asking questions stops you from making assumptions, shows the questioned you did not understand them, and helps build up your bank of intercultural knowledge.
- **Respect:** The foundation of all intercultural communication is respect. By demonstrating respect you earn respect and help create more open and fruitful relationships. Consciously refrain from stereotyping or generalizing groups of people. Respect the right of others to have opinions that are different from your own.
- **Attitude:** Have the attitude that this is an opportunity to experience the other culture's ways. Get to know (really know) people from other cultures. Find areas of agreement in each other's culture, capitalize on common areas in the cultures, and accept areas of difference. Be flexible.
- **The Written Word:** Sometimes people who do not have English as their first language will read more proficiently than they speak. It is a good idea to write things down, or have the student write them, as a back up.
- **Humor:** In an intercultural environment one person's joke is another's insult. Be wary of differences in the sense of humor and also the acceptability of banter in the other culture.
- **Always Check:** The easiest way of minimizing the negative impact of intercultural communication is to check and double check. Whether agreeing on something or giving instructions, a minute spent double checking that all parties are "on the same page" may save much frustration later. Presume good intentions. Most people do not mean to be insensitive.
- **Self-Reflect:** A good intercultural communicator not only looks outward but also inward. Ask yourself questions, and clarify your own beliefs and attitudes. Take time to reflect on your own communication style or motivation and see where you can improve as an individual. If possible, investigate the other culture's perception of your culture by reading literature about your culture through their eyes before entering into communication with them.

Some of the above adapted from: Kwintessential Ltd

Language

One cultural barrier is language. Even when two people think they can speak each other's language, the chance of error is high. Usages and contextual inferences may be completely different between cultures. So even though one speaker may have learned the vocabulary of the other's language, selecting the most appropriate words, with the correct intonation, spoken with appropriate eye contact while standing a proper distance from the other are all critical even before one considers the propriety of the topic to be discussed.

When language skills are unequal, clarifying one's meaning in the following four ways will improve communication.

- Avoid using slang and idioms; choose words that will convey only the most specific denotative meaning.
- Listen carefully and, if in doubt, ask for confirmation of understanding (particularly important if local accents and pronunciation are a problem).
- Recognize that accenting and intonation can cause meaning to vary significantly.
- Respect the local communication formalities and styles, and watch for any changes in body language.

Body Language

Another type of language barrier may be body language. Unfamiliarity with cultural communication differences can lead to misinterpretation, misunderstanding and even unintentional insult.

Behavior of people falls into two overall types. Some of our behavior (which is rooted in our biology) is the same across all peoples, no matter what the national background. For instance:

- Smiling when happy or when greeting one another.
- Waving for greeting.
- Laughing when amused.
- Blushing or hiding their faces when embarrassed.
- Startling as a reaction to shock.
- Crying when sad or in pain.
- Frowning when discomforted or concerned.
- Forming barriers with legs or arms in front of their bodies (e.g., by crossing them) to keep others at bay.
- Shrugging to express, *I don't know*.
- Slumping when dejected or tired.
- Standing straight when alert or confident.

On the other hand, we have **culturally learned behavior** that is peculiar to a particular cultural group. Below are examples of just some of these behavioral differences.

- Snubbing one's nose in one of the cultures of Southern India is a sign of respect, but in some other cultures this shows disrespect for the other person. For Greek Cypriots a similar gesture is a way of greeting the other person.
- In many Middle Eastern countries it is normal for men to embrace and kiss when greeting each other; other cultures may shake hands.
- In Greek culture it is disrespectful when in a church to stand with your hands held behind your back, or to stand or sit with your legs crossed.

- French do not eat with their hands, but for Indians this is acceptable. Japanese and Chinese eat with sticks.
- Generally in the Middle East men will not wear shorts and women will be covered with a scarf on their head and well covered to far below the knees. In some more conservative Moslem countries many women are covered in black from head to toe and their faces are veiled. Physical contact for these women with other males outside the family and home would not be acceptable at all. Any prolonged eye contact with a man outside the family would be strictly forbidden.
- In western society slim women are considered beautiful but the Ibos of Africa find obese women attractive, because fatness announces an adequate food supply.
- In most cultures men and women who are married live together in a family. In some cultures, however, in Papua New Guinea for example, even though a couple may be married, the woman will live with other women together in their own quarters. The man will live together with other men separately from the women.
- Food preferences also vary from culture to culture.

Adapted from: <http://interculturalrelations.com/v2i1Winter1999/w99leigh.htm>

Examples of faux pas

When one is unaware of other cultural practices, it is easy to make mistakes. Make it your habit to learn as much as you can of the cultural background of your tutees. Below is a list of some possible cultural faux pas. While some of these are closely related to tutoring, others are included for interest.

- In Greece, showing the number *five* by displaying a hand with fingers spread and palm facing the recipient of the gesture is offensive. The same gesture with the palm facing the gesturer is not.
- In the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, the "V sign", made by holding the middle and index fingers up so as to form a V-shape (such as when indicating "two" of something), is considered offensive when made with the back of the hand pointed towards the listener, particularly when done so with an upward thrust. It is seen as having similar meaning to "the finger". With the hand held the other way, so the palm points towards the listener, the gesture is perfectly acceptable.
- The American hand symbol for 'OK' means zero or worthless in France, and money in Japan. And in Brazil, Russia, and Germany, it is an offensive gesture.
- Thumbs up, like the OK symbol, is a positive symbol in American culture, but this same gesture is an offensive Iraqi insult, equivalent to using the middle finger in the Western world.
- In several countries, displaying the soles of the feet, touching somebody with a foot or with shoes, or pointing feet at someone is considered disrespectful and insulting.
- Colors have different meanings in different cultures: The color purple is associated with funerals in Mexico, joy in China, danger in Japan, and purity in India.
- In American culture, direct eye contact during a conversation shows respect and intensive listening; avoiding it is a sign of nervousness or lying. But for many Asians, avoiding direct eye contact is the only acceptable way to hold a conversation. They may think you're bold, impolite, or even aggressive if you are looking right at them when speaking.

- Americans tend to answer questions as quickly as possible, but Asians take their time to formulate their response. Silence for as much as twenty seconds would not be unusual and does not indicate inattention or refusal to answer.
- Asian students may be reluctant to ask questions, as identifying problems would be a “face” diminishing act. They also tend to avoid asking questions in class out of respect for the teacher and would be most reluctant to correct an error made by a teacher.
- African regions: A left-handed handshake. Offering and accepting things with the left hand.
- Arab countries; Indian Subcontinent; Japan; Middle East; East Africa; South-East Asia: A left-handed handshake or passing food at the table with the left hand.
- Scandinavia; Central and Eastern Europe; Japan; China; Hawaii; India: It is considered unacceptable to enter someone's household and leave your shoes on your feet. It is also considered impolite in many Canadian households, but not as universally.
- China: Giving someone a timepiece as a gift. The phrase "giving a timepiece" is a homonym for burying the dead. It is also considered rude to eat first before the elders. Another faux pas at the dining table would be to eat a side dish without coming back to eating rice. This is viewed as a faux pas in Japan as well.
- Central and Eastern Europe: Shaking hands while wearing gloves (this does not apply to women).
- France: Asking an individual their job or name directly. Offering someone a gift of chrysanthemums on an occasion other than a funeral (as chrysanthemums are generally associated with death in France).
- India; Pakistan; Bangladesh; Burma: Eating or shaking hands with the left hand, not greeting family elders at a gathering, addressing elders without salutations.
- Japan: When greeting or thanking another person, not bowing lower than an elder or a person of higher social status. Passing food from one pair of chopsticks to another is also considered rude. The latter is also viewed as a faux pas in other Asian countries such as China.
- Korea: Not bowing when greeting or thanking an elder. Writing someone's name in red (which normally symbolizes death).
- Middle East: Addressing an elder or person higher in social status with his/her bare name. Words like uncle/aunt, (elder) brother/sister or formally Mr./Mrs. are expected to be used.
- India; Pakistan: Walking with shoes on the carpet inside a house. Calling an elder or a stranger of the opposite sex with just their name.
- Romania; Russia; Slovakia; Czech Republic; Croatia; Hungary; Serbia Republic; Poland; Bulgaria; Ukraine; Estonia; Lithuania; Latvia: Giving somebody an even number of flowers, which should only be done in funerals.
- South America; Spain, and other Spanish speaking countries: Neglecting to greet someone at a social / family gathering. Any kind of large gathering of friends or family should be started by greeting every person present and ended by making sure to say goodbye upon leaving. This rule is more relaxed in a group of young people. Generally these formalities are far more relaxed in Latin America than in Spain.
- Thailand: Stepping over or standing on bills or coins—they all have the face of the King, who is highly revered. Also, touching a Thai person on their head, as the head is considered a sacred part of the body. Food must be kept above the ground level.
- Bangladesh; India; Pakistan: Stepping/sitting on paper, books, money, or religious items is considered inappropriate.

Cultural Impressions Exercise

1. Choose a partner.
2. Discuss with your partner the following questions:
 - a. How do you identify yourself culturally? (Review the list of what aspects culture may include.)
 - b. How did your parents choose your name? Does your name have a meaning? Do you have a nickname?
 - c. What misconceptions or stereotypes might others have about people from your culture(s)?
 - d. What misconceptions might you have about other people's cultures? How do family and social influences affect your perception of these cultures?
3. Discuss how cultural issues might relate to tutoring and school.
 - a. Why is it important to know and use your tutee's correct name?
 - b. Describe a situation in which you think cultural differences played a part in a misunderstanding. What happened? What did you do? What could you have done?
 - c. How/when/why might you bring up issues of cultural differences with your tutee?
 - d. Describe a personal experience in which differences in cultural values contributed to an interesting perspective. What did you do to encourage this interaction?