

Respecting Learners in Their Unique Cultures

by Jane Vella, PhD

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Culture is a mix of context and history. In *Patterns of Culture*, Ruth Benedict writes: “His culture is the raw material out of which a man makes his life.” In the preface to that book, Margaret Mead reminds us of our duty: “We must understand the individual as living in his culture and the culture as lived by individuals.”

There is a unique culture in New Orleans, New York, Japan, and Singapore. A PCMA Conference in Hawaii is not the same as one held in Nashville or Anaheim. Those of us who visit new and different cultures to teach, organize, and manage need guidelines for honouring the culture of each group or individual.

Dr. Margie Ahnan, an Indonesian physician who teaches nurses in Jakarta, said that the principles of adult learning relate directly to the practice of respecting men and women in their unique cultures. As a professor, she uses words like respect, safety, listening, engagement, needs assessment, and learning tasks to name a few of these guidelines.

After her first professional development course with experienced nurses in Jakarta, Ahnan wrote, “The lions are loose in Jakarta!” That perfectly described how excited the nurses were as they discovered ways of learning.

How does one use respect in a new and unfamiliar setting? It begins early — the attitude of respect means that the teacher or leader will do her homework. Before conducting a conference at a university in Calgary, Alberta, last month, I studied the university’s Web page, catalogues, and school newspaper. I also requested that a number of the students and professors attending respond to a few questions via e-mail.

One might call this needs assessment, using open questions, honoring the sequence of preparation, and listening to the learners. It is also a simple form of respect.

A useful guideline in cross-cultural situations is an axiom we teach:

Don’t tell what you can ask; don’t ask if you know the answer; tell in dialogue.

I know we can have a true dialogue across cultures because I have done so, and people have learned through that dialogue. The magic is in listening, not telling, in deep respect for the learner.

Barbara Kingsolver, in her novel *The Bean Trees* (1988), offers an exquisite example of such a relationship of respect as the protagonist describes her mother:

There were two things about Mamma. One is she always expected the best out of me. And the other is that then no matter what I did, whatever I came home with, she acted like it was the moon I had just hung up in the sky and plugged in all the stars. Like I was that good.

Mamma, in this case, is showing that lavish affirmation that is magical for motivating learning. Though Mamma did not always understand her independent young daughter, she always respected her.

Who's Learning, Who's Teaching?

The gap between my culture and your culture is great not only if you are Japanese, but if you are young ... or male ... or Republican ... or a technocrat. The burden is on me, as the teacher or presenter, to make the effort to create dialogue with you. Through dialogue, we both learn.

I do not give up my culture when teaching in another culture. However, my culture is enhanced by the gifts of the new culture.

In Masailand, northern Tanzania, I was once invited by an ancient leader of the clan to visit him at home. My colleague and I stooped down to enter the smoky house with roof, walls, and floor of mud, heated by an open fire at the far end. There were no windows.

As my eyes accustomed themselves to the low light, I saw the elder and some of his friends sitting on low stools. He beckoned for us to sit down and said, in Swahili, "Karibuni. Nyumba yangu ni nyumba yenu. Karibuni. Translated, that sentence means, "Welcome! My house is your house!" In that moment, I learned a new definition of hospitality. When cultural differences are honored and celebrated, creative learning occurs.

How to Dialogue Across Cultures

1. Assume that the new culture is not adversarial. Let people know that you are in the

learning business, not the teaching business. Affirm the differences you perceive and honor them.

2. Watch your language. There is no “them.” If you consider 70-year-old, gray-haired, portly women “them” — and you meet me, I promise you I will break your stereotype. Look again at Margaret Mead’s words: We must understand the individual as living in his culture and the culture as lived by individuals.
3. Ask, ask, ask. Find a single person of that culture whom you can latch onto as your mentor.
Check out everything, including the format of a conference program, site, language, length of time, materials — everything.
4. Expect the best of people, and affirm their performance.
5. Put the learners to work using learning tasks designed with an eye to what is appropriate in the culture. Have your mentor review your program for cultural quality control.
6. With your mentor as a guide, conduct a needs assessment with a sample of the people who are coming to your program. If you do not have time or energy to do extensive preparation, spend the first part of a workshop assessing the expectations and experience of the learners.

A simple learning task for that could be: Read over the learning objectives of this workshop. Name one personal expectation you have for this time together. Hearing two or three of those expectations can put you, the leader, into the picture. Also, as participants hear others’ expectations, they find their own hopes and fears confirmed and clarified.

Dr. Jane Vella, founder of **Global Learning Partners** (www.globalearning.com), is the author of *Learning To Listen Learning To Teach*, *Training Through Dialogue*, *How Do They Know They Know*, and *Taking Learning To Task*. For more information, visit www.globalearning.com.