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Time Management, Learning Events, and Culture



Global Learning Partners

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About the Author, Jenny Giezendanner

Jennifer Giezendanner presently works in Bangalore, India under an Indian organization that focuses on the development of minority peoples of that great country. She works with facilitators of their field programs and as a trainer and training consultant to equip national staff, partners, and local leaders. Jenny became a [Certified Dialogue Education Practitioner](#) with Global Learning Partners in 2011. Feel free to [connect with her on LinkedIn](#).



Jenny (far right) with her husband, Ruedi & friends.

About Global Learning Partners, Inc.

For over 20 years, the partners, staff, and a worldwide network of associates at Global Learning Partners, Inc. (GLP) have been working with non-profit organizations, academic institutions, government agencies, and corporations around the world. We specialize in helping organizations to assess existing organizational resources (training materials, personnel skills and expertise, organizational structure and culture), determine current organizational needs, and strategically plan and execute highly-customized training programs designed specifically to address those needs.

In all of our work, GLP utilizes a rigorous learning-centered approach. This approach is change-focused; it provides a structured and accountable framework for the design and facilitation of all training events. Thousands of individuals in 60 countries have graduated from GLP's [core course in Dialogue Education](#). This extensive network of course graduates testify time and again to the great impact this approach has had on their work in teaching, training, and program design across voluntary, government, private, and academic sectors.

Our clients from around the world include, among many others, the Academy for Educational Development (now FHI 360), World Vision Canada, Jordan Civil Society Project, Canadian Red Cross in the Sudan, State of California's Department of Health, Women, Infant and Children's (WIC) Supplemental Nutrition Program, and the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

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Time Management, Learning Events, and Culture

Rubber time in Indonesia, *mañana* in Latin America, the *Pünktlichkeit* of the Germanic - each characterizes a particular perception of time in its respective culture. Because many of us regularly interact in more than one cultural context, this variation in time consciousness creates a significant challenge when we teach adults.

Starting and finishing sessions throughout a class day *on time* – as defined by local perceptions of time – is an important means of acknowledging the value of local cultural norms and thus of demonstrating respect. But how can we do that in appropriate, sensitive, and respectful ways in the variety of cultures in which we work? How can we possibly define guidelines for time management with such a wide diversity confronting us?

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R-E-S-P-E-C-T

Perhaps the greatest principle guiding Dialogue Education is respect. In any given teaching context we aim to demonstrate respect to all participants. To achieve this, however, requires doing our homework and finding out, ahead of time and then continuing through our sojourn in that culture, what kind of time-consciousness and what kind of time constraints most affect our learners in that context. This is very much part of the standard pre-event practical research or *Learning Needs and Resources Assessment* that we do about our learners. We **ask** our contacts about arrangements and expectations regarding the event, **study** any articles or information written about that cultural context, and, once we're on-site, we **observe** how people manage time locally. The opportunity to make such observation is one of the great benefits of arriving at the teaching site several days in advance of the actual event.

Example from North Africa

It is easy to pick up clichés about a culture which are not necessarily true, and which can severely hamper a teacher who is attempting to show respect. In the North African context where we lived the expatriates sometimes grumbled about *local time* and that things never started as scheduled. They themselves then would tend to show up quite late to meetings involving local participants. As we observed the local behavior, however, we noticed some

further details about WHO arrived WHEN that surprised us. North Africans regularly showed up to meet us exactly on the dot of our scheduled appointment! So we asked ourselves, "How can these locals consistently arrive on time if punctuality is not a cultural value?" A pattern emerged. If the person was younger than us, or if it was someone who wanted to show us respect, he would be right on time. At larger meetings, the youngest or least senior participants came early, then with increasing seniority the others would arrive until the most senior person walked in the door. Once he arrived, the meeting officially began. While waiting, the others contented themselves with chatting and drinking tea so that good rapport was building in preparation for the formal business to come. The leader himself had formed previous relationships with most of the attendees, and certainly had established the respect of most. After observing this pattern we realized that to show up "late" was a rather presumptuous way for a foreigner to demand respect which had not necessarily been earned. At that point we recognized that it was our national colleagues who instead had good reason to consider lateness "expat time" !

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Start by Asking

Long before we as teachers complete plans for a learning event, we must interact with the event sponsor, the person who invited us, or their local contact person, to discover what a "normal" workday in that particular environment looks like. Only then is it reasonable to set a daily schedule with mealtimes, session lengths, and break times. Some venues observe strict mealtimes, others may post official mealtimes which only apply to the regular staff rather than the visitors at the workshop, who then have a different, perhaps unwritten, meal schedule.



Sometimes childcare facilities require parents to drop off and pick up children within a restricted time frame, or local staff are only available to unlock the facilities at certain times. Very often these parameters are non-negotiable, even – or especially - in the most laissez-faire environments! It pays to get the information and set your class timings in harmony with these. Such logistical limitations may be the details that "everybody knows" and only we as outsiders are left to figure out. Helping

our local contact person realize that we don't know the local situation can sensitize her to our need for that help. It may take more than one instance of asking, and require us to ask specifically before that need becomes clear, so start inquiring as early as possible!

It's also helpful to leave enough flexibility in the schedule to be able to change it after arriving on site, yet before the start of the workshop. Be sure all participants know the starting and ending times well ahead also. Communicate the times in as many ways as possible – emails, bulletin boards, phone calls, etc. Holding an opening event provides another helpful opportunity to make sure everyone has gotten the message. But, be sure to schedule the opening event appropriately: in one case, I was unhappily surprised when the welcome dinner started three hours late, only to learn later that in this culture dinner simply does not happen before 10 pm. In some cases it's been helpful to list two times for the starting: when the doors will open, and also when the formal activities begin. This allows people with a long commute or other constraints to better figure out their options. It also allows for the more socially oriented ones to maximize their chatting times! Again, by clearly communicating these details of schedule we honor the needs and desires of the participants to take part in ways that suit them best. There are cultures where an announced time proclaims the time to begin getting ready, rather than the start of the formalities as a Westerner might understand them. In this case, too, it may be good to state two times: the beginning of preparation time, and the actual formal starting time.

Study local cultural information

I have lived in several Muslim neighborhoods. While those cultures were very process- and relationship-oriented, there are also clear time frames for certain activities, and firm social agreement on when to do what. The five prayer calls occur in a highly scheduled fashion. The month of fasting is strictly regulated by sun and moon. In Hindu and Buddhist practices there is also a clear awareness of auspicious days and even minutes for certain events. On one billboard announcing a Hindu ritual in Malaysia the beginning time was proclaimed to be 8:03 am! Not a minute sooner or later.



Example from Indonesia

When we first lived in Indonesia we found great encouragement by joining a small local fellowship of Christians. I had read some books about Indonesian culture before arrival and heard that time there was considered “rubber.” One afternoon I carefully made my way to a women's meeting to arrive exactly at 5 o'clock, the announced starting time, wondering how early I would be. To my surprise when I walked in just before 5 o'clock, the ladies were well into their worship and prayer time, and I figured out that they had started at least twenty minutes earlier! Suddenly a new meaning struck me about the concept “rubber.” Not only could things start a bit delayed but they could also start “early” as defined by my Swiss watch. For them, it made perfect sense to make their way to the meeting place as soon as their daily chores were done, and when a quorum of the regular attendees had been reached, to start! On that day, traffic was lighter than usual, so the quorum was reached and things got started earlier. The advantages of this system are strong. City transport becomes more difficult to negotiate as evening approaches and we noticed over time that most evening fellowship meetings would begin ahead of the announced times, though with no penalty for those who slipped in later. This strategy also allowed for making the most of the times together. If no one was in a hurry the camaraderie could be extended as well, and still people were able to get home at a reasonable time.

If people are not observing your schedule in spite of good modeling of beginning and ending on time, it might be that you have overlooked an important part of their routine that they are not easily able to change.

Take a good look at what people do naturally in relation to time, then ask yourself how that fits into the patterns of their lives. How can your event best be fitted to their natural patterns? If people are not observing your schedule in spite of good modeling of beginning and ending on time, it might be that you have overlooked an important part of their routine that they are not easily able to change. We recently saw this happen in a country where workdays normally begin at 9 am. The workshop organizers set the day's start instead for 8:30. Predictably, the participants with families, especially, were struggling to get to the workshop on time. On the other hand, the workshop ended by 4 pm, and many participants felt at rather loose ends until supper time, since they were used to working until 5:30 or 6:00.

Observe and Adjust

The first time I visited one South Asian country I naturally settled down in my guestroom around 9 pm to read or sleep. Suddenly I would be awakened with the blaring of TVs and clatter of dishes in the apartment buildings all around me. “What kind of party is this?” I wondered. Night after

night the same thing would happen. Finally I realized that supper was served locally at around 10:30, after which people would enjoy some TV programs, do the dishes, and then, at last, prepare for bed.

Previous to that in another South Asian country I was leading a workshop. I asked my sponsor ahead of time when the class should like afternoon tea break. "After class ends," was the answer. I wondered just how the participants would manage without an earlier afternoon break, but in fact the late break was what they wanted. Our mornings were long, with a good break half-way through, and lunch was served after 1:30 pm. Since supper was also served very late in the evening, they preferred the tea around 4:30, also as a kind of mini-celebration and a time to unwind at the end of the workday.

In some countries we have scheduled very brief breaks of only 10 minutes for a quick sip of tea. In those places this is considered enough, as the underlying expectation is for each person to freely get up and use the restroom whenever he wants, not necessarily during the official break time. That takes the burden off sometimes limited facilities, especially in the case of big groups, and it gives them a shorter workday, which they appreciate.

Example from South Asia

A big mistake I made in timing at the workshop with the late teatimes occurred on the "opening informal get-together" where the idea was to become acquainted first, then share a nice meal together directly afterwards. Since we were going to start seriously the next morning, I asked if we could convene the welcome meeting for 6:00 pm followed by dinner at 7:00 pm, so that everyone could have some rest before beginning the next morning. Being very agreeable, the host consented, but what a disaster! The caterers, who could not imagine a party beginning before 9:00, did not deliver the food until shortly before then. This left all of us sitting around rather embarrassed wondering what we were doing for several hours! Certainly I was wondering that. I realized I should have simply asked my host what time *he* suggested for this occasion and complied with that, no matter how nonsensical it might appear to me at first. From then on I observed which activities the participants in that workshop pursued and the times they did them. This caused me to recognize that day vs. night was not the same sort of issue it was for me. Around midnight the night before the workshop ended, about half of them piled into their tiny automobile to careen off on a crazy errand, all while I was asleep. The next day they made a skit of the wonderfully fun memories they had made during their adventure.

Professionalism and Time

It is clear that we must first strive to understand the local behavior patterns, logistical restrictions, and expectations of our learners. During the first day's feedback session we also solicit the class's input about how well the schedule works for them and what kind of adjustments might need to

be made – and then make them. However, once the optimal schedule is established we respect the learners' desires to learn, grow, and excel in their own professionalism. I have never heard our participants in a workshop complain about the fact that we always started on time, finished on time, and kept to the schedule we announced for the workshop. In fact, we are careful to model this kind of respect for time when leading class sessions. Once the schedule is announced, the participants soon observe whether we ourselves take care to observe it. As we consistently start on time, they arrive on time as well. Start (or finish!) sessions later than the times announced, and people will begin to disregard the schedule. It's helpful to have an easily visible "class clock" as a standard by which everyone can agree. One of my Indian colleagues recently complained publicly at an event which was being run by someone who did not follow the schedule. He protested, "We can do it. We Indians can start and finish on time!" It disturbed him that he was being treated unprofessionally. And it also added a dimension of chaos, since people were coming and going from the table groups at all hours, reducing the effectiveness of our learning.

Example from Indonesia

Similarly, in a remote rural region of Indonesia an expatriate co-teacher of mine once remarked that due to heavy rain he wouldn't expect our class to show up anywhere near on time. In that context heavy rain discourages road travel, which is mostly by motorcycle, but our regular starting time all week had been on the dot of 8:00 am, and the learners had consistently been on time. Convinced that the participants were as eager and motivated as they'd shown themselves all week, I dared my co-teacher to think they might manage to be on time. Sure enough, by 8:00 all but one were in their seats! And that one arrived not much later, in spite of the continuing heavy rain. After class that day my co-teacher admitted that he had greatly underestimated the participants.

Even if time "runs out" to be able to accomplish all the day's hoped-for learning tasks, the teacher should model self-discipline, and reduce the number of tasks to the realities of how fast the class can achieve their learning goals, so that they maintain the day's starting and ending times.

While it's important for a teacher to gently adjust the times for individual learning tasks to the rhythms of the learners throughout the day, it is critical also to model starting and finishing on time at the beginnings and endings of the day and the major break times. This builds a sense of safety in the classroom and shows respect to the desire for professionalism amongst our learners. Even if time "runs out" to be able to accomplish all the day's hoped-for learning tasks, the teacher should model self-discipline, and reduce the number of tasks to the realities of how fast the class can achieve their learning goals, so that they maintain the day's starting and ending times.

Sometimes a culturally appropriate reminder can help maintain a schedule. At a workshop in Indonesia, one person with high status in the class made so many long-winded comments on the

first day that the class day finished three hours late. When a repeat began to take shape on the second day, the national lead teacher politely offered that the class could again get out that late, or that everybody's comments should be briefer in order to allow a timely finish of the day. All of a sudden, comments did become briefer and more to the point! From then on they finished on time.

A few years ago I was privileged to attend a board meeting of a locally run development agency. The board members were discussing their desire to raise the level of professionalism amongst their staff. They turned to us, the expatriate visitors, and encouraged us to "teach our folks a good work ethic." To myself I chuckled, as I reflected about what I'd already observed in the colleagues from their agency with whom I had worked. Their commitment to excellence, their hard work and willingness to go beyond the call of duty, and their sheer joy of accomplishment had long been an inspiration to me. Anything I might have taught or modeled for them had been paid back in multiple dividends. When we respect the motivation, potential, and achievements of our colleagues from any background, we can also learn much from them.

As teachers of adults committed to respecting each learner, we participate in a process of introducing innovation into the cultures of education wherever we work. "Learning means change," is our watchword. A view of culture as dynamic gives us the freedom to propose and hope for positive changes in our learners and in the world they influence. Working with them to create an environment of respect appropriate for their context, including the management of time, requires intentionality and sensitivity, but it is one of the most rewarding areas of change for both the learners and the teachers.

