

Cross-Cultural Communication Exercise and Ideas
Created for the Rose-Hulman Ventures Design Symposium, August 2008

Initial Exercise Dialogue

Please break into groups of three people.

The game we are about to play is modeled after the game "Taboo": the goal is to successfully describe an object to a partner without using certain "taboo" words. One person in each group is the Censor. They will watch for the use of "taboo" words. The other two people are partners.

"Taboo" rules:

- No form or part of ANY word printed on the card may be given as a clue. Examples: If the Guess word is PAYMENT, "pay" cannot be given as a clue. If DRINK is a Taboo word, "drunk" cannot be given as a clue. If SPACESHIP is the Guess word, you can't use "space" or "ship" as a clue.
- No sound effects or noises may be made, such as explosions or engine noises.
- You cannot say the object "sounds like" or "rhymes with" another word.

Here's the twist: There will be no interaction between partners. Partner #1 will have 30 seconds to describe the object to Partner #2. Partner #2 must keep their head down (to minimize non-verbal cues), and cannot ask any questions of Partner #1. After 30 seconds, Partner #2 will have 15 seconds to (silently) write down what they believe the object to be. We'll then reveal the results, and switch roles between the Partners.

If you use a Taboo word, the Censor will interrupt you, and your team loses a point: one point for each infraction. Censors will keep track of the points.

OK, I am passing out Object One and the associated Taboo words - face down - to the first Partners and the Censors. (Object One: Band-Aid)

When you turn the paper over, you'll have 30 seconds to describe the object fully to your partner. Ready, go!

OK, Partner 2, you now have 15 seconds to write down what you think the object was.

Reveal time! Show your cards to your partners and Censors. How did you do? If you got it, Censors, give your team two points.

OK, now - Partner 2, it's your turn. I'm passing out Object Two and the associated Taboo words - face down - to you and the Censors. (Object Two: Rice ball stuffed with pickled plum (*onigiri* with *umeboshi*)).

When you turn the paper over, you'll have 30 seconds to describe the object fully to your partner. Ready, go!

OK, Partner 1, you now have 15 seconds to write down what you think the object was.

Reveal time! Show your cards to your partners and Censors. How did you do? If you got it, Censors, give your team two points.

Do we have a highest-scoring team?

What's the message of this game?

It's hard enough to communicate effectively within a given culture - this audience is very likely to immediately know what a "Band-Aid" is and to have sensory memories associated with this object.

Communication gets harder given constraints like email, with no nonverbal cues; or conference calls, with stilted conversation and no visuals; even webconferences are not quite the same as face-to-face communication.

Cross-cultural communication is more difficult. How many sensory memories do you have associated with *onigiri*?

Rice ball facts:

- According to the Japan Consumer Marketing Research Institute, over 10 million *onigiri* are sold per day by Japan's convenience stores: a business of 400 billion yen (about 3.6 billion U.S. dollars) per year.
- The leader in selling pre-made rice balls in Japan is... Seven-Eleven (Seven-Eleven corporation is the largest convenience store chain in Japan).
- What shape are rice balls? "Rice balls" are not necessarily round. As a matter of fact, they are very often triangular.

Without good cross-cultural communication skills, we can't get to learning "deep culture": how others tend to perceive time, power, hierarchy, individualism, risk, responsibility. All of these are key to successful co-teaming projects. (as opposed to "surface culture" - do I shake hands with teammates, or give them a single kiss on the cheek?)

How can we improve our students' chances of cross-cultural communication success in their co-teaming experiences?

- Provide training in both "surface" and "deep" cultural aspects.
- Ensure teams have face-to-face interactions if at all possible.
- Draw it! Send/share sketches, plots, visuals.
- Set aside time at the beginning of each meeting/interaction for a "culture moment" - these don't have to be deep and heavy, they are team builders as well as cultural learning opportunities. Examples:
 - Learn a great expression in a foreign language (*san gen shugi*)
 - Send food (or a recipe)
 - Listen to a currently popular song
 - Celebrate a holiday
 - "On Friday night, I usually leave work around X o'clock, and then the rest of the night usually goes like this..."
 - "Sometimes people are surprised to learn that Americans don't typically..."
 - "One of the worst things you can do at a business meeting is..."
 - "The best way to show respect to your boss is..."
 - "If we are late with a report or project, what will happen is..."
 - (Read a short case study ahead of time) Discuss: Who is responsible for what happened? How should they fix it?
 - What has surprised you the most about your co-teaming experience so far?
 - What do you think the strongest commonalities are between your international teams?

Campuses and disciplines have cultures, too. A culture moment isn't a bad idea, even for a co-teaming experience that is not international.

- "It bothers me when people say that (people who practice this discipline) are {or 'don't', or 'only value,'}..."
- "What people don't understand about studying (name of discipline) is..."
- "I wish more people knew more about (discipline) because..."
- "If I could teach everyone in the country about one topic of (discipline), I'd teach them (what? and why?)..."
- "I think the three biggest strengths (people who practice this discipline) bring to a project are..."
- "When we meet with a (discipline) professor, they expect us to be... {or 'have', or 'not be'}"
- Give two current buzzwords or hot topics in your discipline, and explain them such that the other team would be able to impress someone with their inside knowledge of these hot topics.
- "If we are late with a report or a project, what will happen is..."
- When you have a team meeting, where and when do you usually meet? What typically happens?
- "The worst thing you can do to an X University student is..."
- "The best thing you can do for an X University student is..."
- "Right now the biggest problem on X College's campus is... and here's what I think we should do to fix it..."
- "On Saturday afternoon between 1:00 and 5:00, most X College students are..."
- What has surprised you the most about your co-teaming experience so far?
- What do you think the strongest differences and commonalities are between your teams?