

Critical Incidents for Intercultural Communication

An interactive tool for developing
awareness, knowledge, and skills



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Knowledge, and Skills

Facilitator and Activity Guide

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Acknowledgements

Through the Intercultural Education Programs, the Language Training and Adult Literacy division is delighted to present this educational resource to the public. *Critical Incidents for Intercultural Communication: An Interactive Tool for Developing Awareness, Knowledge, and Skills* was developed by our intercultural education team with the objective of providing educators and service providers with a ready-to-use curricular and training guide that will allow them to introduce the concepts of cultural competence in their learning settings.

The development of this resource would not have been possible without funding from Alberta Employment, Immigration and Industry, through the Language Training Programs initiative. We gratefully acknowledge their support.

Our appreciation goes out to the instructors in the LINC and ESL Intensive programs at NorQuest College who allowed our team to pilot this resource in their classrooms, and specifically to those who have made continuous use of it in their instructional practice. We also would like to thank individuals whose input was instrumental in the development phase of this resource: Judee Blohm, Clare Myers, Christine Land (ASSIST), Sabrina Majok-Majok, and the creative team of NorQuest College's Centre for Innovation and Development, especially Barb Pearce and Shannon Pregitzer.

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Introduction - What Are Critical Incidents?

Critical incidents are tools for increasing our awareness and understanding of human attitudes, expectations, behaviours, and interactions. They are intended to engage participants at a meaningful, personal level as they examine attitudes and behaviours that might be critical to their effectiveness in the roles they are already performing or preparing for (in the workplace, in educational settings, and in society at large). Triandis first used critical incidents to develop cross-cultural competence in the 1960s in his work with cultural assimilators (see also Triandis, 1994).¹

Critical incidents in intercultural communication training are brief descriptions of situations in which a misunderstanding, problem, or conflict arises as a result of the cultural differences of the interacting parties, or a problem of cross-cultural adaptation and communication. Each incident gives only enough information to set the stage and then describes what happened and possibly manifests the feelings and reactions of the people involved. It does not explain the cultural differences that people bring to the situation; these are meant to be discovered or revealed as part of the different activities outlined in this guide.

The critical incidents in this collection were gathered from open-ended interviews with students and instructors from

¹ You will find all the references cited in the bibliography section, where we have also provided you with a list of suggested readings.

the English as a Second Language programs at NorQuest College in Edmonton. Our appreciation goes out to all those who shared their stories and experiences with our team for the purpose of developing cultural competencies and fostering productive, satisfying intercultural relationships and intercultural understanding.

The quote cards were developed from these interviews and are reproduced verbatim. The critical incidents tell a longer story, whereas the quote cards illustrate, in brief statements, the attitudes, assumptions, beliefs about and orientations surrounding culture.

Purpose

“The person who learns language without learning culture risks becoming a fluent fool.” This often-quoted saying illustrates the importance of infusing language curriculum with appropriately sequenced intercultural competence-building exercises.²

To develop intercultural competence, learners need opportunities to reflect in an intentional way on the very real shifts and threats to their identities as they learn a new language and learn how to cope in a new culture. For language instructors, this tool can facilitate a deeper understanding of how their own cultural identities influence the teaching and learning relationship.

We recognize that ESL and LINC instructors are at the forefront of addressing issues such as the ones described in this guide. Since they, as instructors of newcomers to Canada, are acting as cultural bridges, they require a high degree of intercultural sensitivity to perform this complex role.

Intercultural relations and cross-cultural exchanges are complex. This activity guide seeks to provide opportunities to reflect on this complexity, while at the same time facilitating participants’ ability to make distinctions and develop higher degrees of intercultural sensitivity.

² For more information about developing intercultural competence in the language classroom, see Bennet, Bennet, and Allen, 2003.

The theoretical framework used here to understand and work with intercultural sensitivity is the **Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)** developed by Milton Bennett (1986, 1993), according to which “... the core of this sensitivity is an ability to understand subtle differences between cultures. It is an indication of increased cognitive sophistication, a deeper ability to discriminate; therefore, it is considered a more interculturally developed, or sensitive perspective” (Mahon, 2006, p. 392).

According to DMIS, there are three **ethnocentric** and three **ethnorelative** stages. The ethnocentric stages range from an inability to make distinctions and/or disinterest (**denial**), to a polarized “us” and “them” position (**defence**), to a third stage where differences are recognized but in the end, it is believed that people are all the same...“just like me” (minimization).

There are also three ethnorelative stages within which a paradigm shift occurs so that individuals are able to let go of absolutes and recognize that cultures must be understood in relation to one another and in the context that they have developed. These stages include **acceptance**, where one’s culture is understood as one of many valid cultures. **Adaptation** goes one step further, and individuals are able to behave accordingly in situations where other norms and values are needed. Finally, **integration** is the stage in which an individual is able to identify and move with facility in multiple cultures (i.e., the bicultural person).

For learners in the stages of **denial** and **defence**, facilitators should use activities that focus on drawing out similarities before talking about difference. For instance, they could facilitate activities where students are paired together to share their stories and to identify similarities in their experience in order to build a connection. From this common ground, participants can then move to talk about how they are different; but it should be stressed that they need to begin with commonalities because “difference” in these stages can be perceived as a threat. For example, two very different people may discover that they are both mothers of teenaged daughters. This might enable them to connect with each other through this experience. With the establishment of this connection, it is then possible to move to the next step toward understanding the cultural differences in this experience: for instance, exploring how their pregnancies, childbirth, and child-rearing experiences were similar and different.

When participants are in the **minimization** stage, their developmental tasks need to focus on how cultures differ, beginning the development of ethnorelativity. With ethnorelative stages, participants will be able to discuss the complexity of the cultural influences in the incidents, further increasing their ability to identify how behaviour, values, norms, and attitudes are culture-based.

The activities in this guide must be presented with an awareness of these stages in mind. Depending on an individual’s stage, the person may be more or less willing and/or able

to recognize the cultural differences illustrated or may be unable to see them—except in a polarized way of right/wrong, good/bad. Facilitators must also keep in mind the degree of trust required in a group to be able to explore issues and allow people to participate according to their comfort level, alongside their English proficiency.

Learning Objectives

- To draw out, compare, and analyze the commonalities and differences of various interpretations and perceptions surrounding culture, opening the door to a subsequent dialogue about difference
- To increase participants' awareness of their own idiosyncratic or culturally determined interpretations and explanations of other individuals' or groups' behaviour, as well as their attitudes about and responses to situations such as those described in the critical incidents
- To identify cultural differences that might have contributed to particular problems, misunderstandings, or conflicts or have influenced the various interpretations and explanations of the participants
- To assist participants in comprehending the diversity that exists among members of each culture as well as the normative differences between cultures
- To support participants in achieving the necessary understanding to perform in a culturally appropriate and effective manner in similar situations
- To expand participants' awareness of the nature of characteristics and behaviours they should learn about and motivate them to continue learning
- To provide the basis for engaging in role play and other class activities that will build skills for handling problematic and everyday intercultural situations

A Word about Generalizations and Stereotypes

No two individuals are alike. People have different personalities and backgrounds and also a plethora of cultural identities. People from different cultures are likely to experience more profound differences when adapting to a new learning, working, or living milieu. Part of becoming interculturally competent means increasing our knowledge and awareness of the underlying sets of beliefs and meanings (and the values attached to them) that ground culture. We can use this knowledge and awareness about a culture, known as **generalizations**, to predict outcomes and behaviour or to interpret situations.

However, even though we often make a number of generalizations to attach meaning to particular behaviours, we must keep in mind that such generalizations are only clues, which are not entirely representative of or true for every individual in a group, or even true for the group as a whole. In other words, cultural generalizations are statements of likelihood and potential—not statements of certainty. Remembering that we make use of generalizations can prevent us from falling into the trap of stereotyping.

Activity Guide

Below you will find diverse classroom activities that you can adapt to your students, taking into account their level of English proficiency, alongside their readiness and willingness to initiate a conversation about cultural difference.

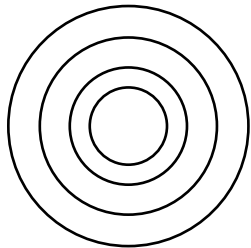
As with all instructional materials, you will be able to design your own classroom activities, adapting them to your teaching style, the learning styles of your students, and the environment in which the teaching/learning takes place.

Hence, the following list is by no means a finished product. We appreciate your feedback in contributing with more activities. Your comments and ideas are an essential part of the efforts of Intercultural Education programs at NorQuest College.

Getting Started... What Is Culture Anyway?

If you are going to include intercultural communication as a thread in your language or teacher development course, a good place to start is with a common understanding of the notion of culture, an introduction of a framework for talking

about culture, and the establishment of norms for classroom discussion.



An excellent activity for establishing such norms and becoming aware of value judgements is with the description, interpretation, and evaluation exercise by Milton and Janet Bennett.³

Several metaphors have been provided to help you explore the concept of culture and a valuable exercise around stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination will help encourage an open environment for meaningful conversations.

³ For a complete description of this activity, see www.intercultural.org/resources.html

Culture as an onion

Think of culture as an onion.⁴ Many, many layers make up an onion. Culture is similar, in that our values and behaviours have many different layers. Draw the diagram below on the board and then ask participants to draw a mind map that describes their own layers.

Inner layer: Cultural identity

Second layer: Race, gender, religion,⁵ ethnicity, social class, sexuality, age, mental and physical ability

Third layer: Communication, motivation, perceptions, attitudes, personality

Fourth layer: Occupation/career, religion, education, citizenship, generation (1st, 2nd, 3rd), language, political ideology, region (province), urban/rural, immigrant status and age at immigration, majority/minority group membership

⁴ Hofstede, 1991

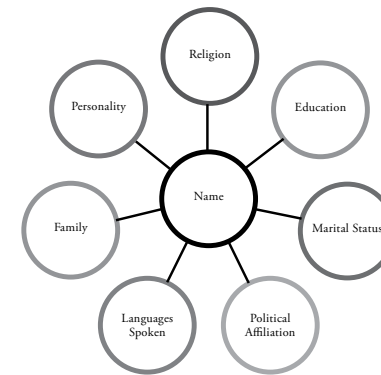
⁵ Religion refers here to components that are integral parts of a person's life. It is usually integral to ethnicity, as it is, for example, for Mennonites, orthodox religious groups, and others (see James & James, 1999)

Many factors contribute to an individual's cultural identity. Starting from the inner layer, these are:

1. An individual's personal, cultural identity, which determines lifestyle and behaviour
2. Personal (social) factors, which are mostly ascribed
3. Psychological factors some of which are based on innate sources and all of which interact with the personal and social factors
4. Social features that are shared by group members (Socialization takes place in, and culture is transmitted or behaviours are sanctioned by, social institutions such as schools, government, and churches.)

“Who do you think you are?”

This model can take our exploration of culture as onion to a deeper level, inducing self-reflection and critical thinking about identity. After working with the vocabulary and concepts, hand out the following diagram and ask the participants to identify which “groups” they belong to that make up who they are. The facilitator should adapt the diagram to suit the issues and topics that he/she wants to address in the classroom.



It is recommended that the facilitator also participate in sharing her/his own cultural identity, again, to become aware of our own cultural assumptions surrounding identity. Next, participants can talk about their responses with their peers (in pairs, groups, jigsaw, etc.). This exercise can be referenced later when you talk about stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination. The facilitator can change the categories (or leave them open) to whatever the topic and level of discussion and the willingness there is within the group to have such a dialogue.⁶

⁶ Example categories are sexual orientation, ability, age, gender (as socially constructed), race (again, as socially constructed), ethnicity (as self-identified), nationality (as determined by birth or self-identification), family roles, etc.

A second possible stage of this exercise is to have a roundtable discussion where the whole class can address certain questions as to how our cultural identities impact how we behave and how we evaluate others' behaviours. The facilitator can prepare some trigger questions that will spark discussion.

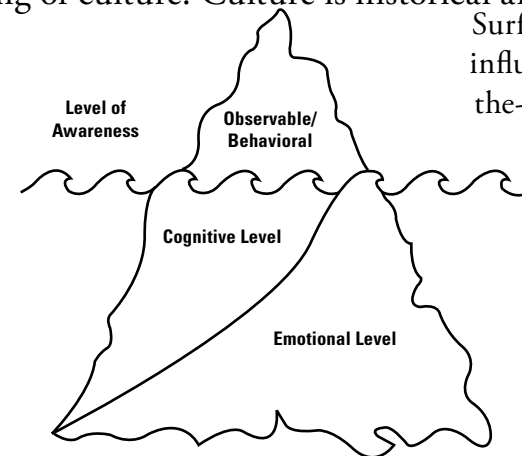
Suggested questions:

1. Where did you learn the rules about, for example, gender and family roles? How do they collide—or not—with the Canadian mainstream/other participants' ideas about that topic?
2. Which of these parts of your cultural identity shift with more ease?
3. Which ones remain more constant?
4. Which of these identity markers do you consider the most important? Why do you think that is?
5. Which ones do you perceive to have an impact in your social/educational/work environment in your country of origin? In Canada?

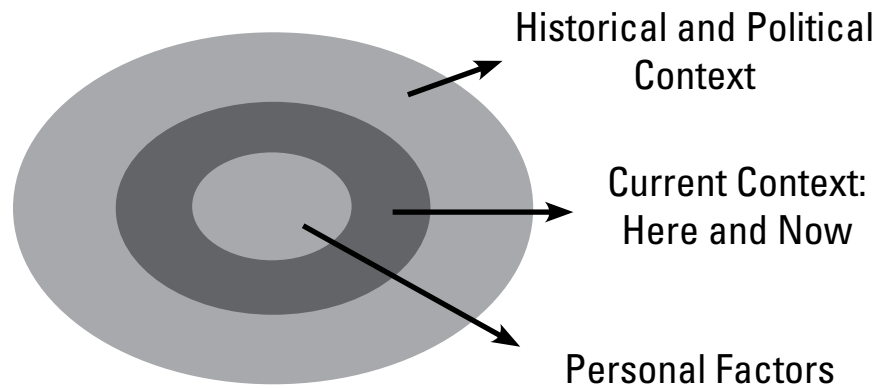
A cultural approach⁷

An additional perspective on the onion metaphor is one developed by Edmonton's Multicultural Health Brokers Co-op in their work with immigrants and refugees. In this model, which takes into consideration the influences of migration, the outer layer represents pre-migration history, the middle layer represents migration history including settlement, and the inner layer represents individual factors.

This model is another important piece for our understanding of culture. Culture is historical and dynamic, and there are many components that influence identity as well as the lens through which individuals will interpret their environment. With this model, participants are introduced to the complex and dynamic nature of culture and possibly move away from the tendency to essentialize culture as a static and monolithic entity.



are many components that influence identity as well as the lens through which individuals will interpret their environment. With this model, participants are introduced to the complex and dynamic nature of culture and possibly move away from the tendency to essentialize culture as a static and monolithic entity.



7 Multicultural Health Brokers Co-op, 2004.

Culture as an iceberg⁸

Draw an iceberg on the board and ask participants to brainstorm about what elements of culture are visible above the surface and those that are hidden below. The facilitator can also list the elements below on the board and ask participants to place them in the appropriate place—above or below.

Visible (above): facial expressions, religious rituals, paintings, literature, gestures, holiday customs, foods, eating habits, music, styles of dress

Invisible (below): religious beliefs, importance of time, values, beliefs about child rearing, concept of leadership, concept of fairness, nature of friendship, notions of modesty, understanding of the natural world, concept of self, general world view, concept of personal space, rules of social etiquette, etc.

8 See Storti, C., Bennhold-Samaan, L., and U.S. Peace Corps, 1997.

9 Image adapted Schmitz, 2003.

Imagining “PSD”: Relating prejudice, stereotype, and discrimination

This activity is designed to raise students’ awareness of the meanings and implications of stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination by making up a fictional character and categorizing its identity. It has the potential of being a high-risk exercise; hence facilitators should be aware of the degree of trust among participants and adapt the exercise accordingly. To engage in this exercise, facilitators must also understand that they may need to move outside their own comfort levels.

1. Ask a participant (or do it yourself) to draw an alien face on the board or flip chart and then invite students to tell you about it. In our practice as intercultural educators, we have named the character “PSD” (which stands for Prejudice, Stereotyping, and Discrimination). Because the character is represented as non-anthropomorphic, examples can be less personal/threatening and yet have the same impact. List the characteristics around the face. Consider aspects of diversity such as gender, sexuality, marital status, educational background, urban/rural, age, occupation, ability, religious affiliation, etc. This is an opportunity for the facilitator to include “uncomfortable” categories to the list and to include less risky characteristics such as “the character is from another planet and has three eyes.”

2. Once the character has been described, stop and ask, “How do we know all this when we have never seen the character before?” or “How do we know all this when we have never met this character before?” Then ask, “What are we doing?” Someone is likely to say “prejudice.” If no one says it, then the facilitator can provide the word. Explain **prejudice** by exploring its Latin root *praejudicium* meaning an opinion or judgement formed without due examination. Hence, acts of prejudice can mean decision making on the basis of incomplete information or pre-judging. Then ask the participants, “Has anyone ever thought or said something about you that was not true?” “Have you ever thought or said something about someone else that wasn’t true, based on the person’s appearance/origin/sexual orientation?”
3. The next step is to ask participants to think about the character’s neighbourhood (or planet!) and pretend that everyone who lives there is exactly the same (i.e. all the individuals who live on this planet have bad breath, are bad parents, etc). Then ask, “What are we doing when we say this?” Stereotyping. You can make use of the questions in Step 2 to draw out participants’ experiences with **stereotyping**, either when it was applied to them or when they stereotyped someone else.

4. The next step is to ask participants to imagine that this character is coming into your class and you say, “Since I don’t like aliens/people who have bad breath and profess a different religion, I will not let you be part of my class,” or apply the same to the workplace (in “I will not give you the position you applied for, since you come from the planet ‘XY.’” Then ask, “What is that?” **Discrimination.**
5. Ask participants to share stories of when they used prejudice or stereotyped or discriminated against someone else or when one of these things happened to them. Since this is a high-risk activity, facilitators must also be willing to share their own experiences.
6. A positive way to finish off the session is by drawing attention to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and perhaps providing a copy of the Charter to your students. Again, facilitators will know the level of English proficiency needed by their learners in order to gain the most benefit from this activity.

Activities and Techniques for Using the Critical Incident Cards

Now that you have explored some of the key concepts and ideas around culture, you are ready to explore some of the subtle complexities of culture and increase your ability to distinguish them. The following exercises use the critical incident cards in various ways. Pay attention to the participants’ DMIS stage as you observe their reactions to the activities and facilitate (adjust your expectations) accordingly.

General techniques

1. Group several components together to illustrate a concept or process.
2. Use critical incidents to help teach participants how to write their own incidents.
3. Use a critical incident as a story starter. Students can write outcomes for or role-play the incident.

Building a cultural profile

Use the following questions to look at various elements of culture. Pick one set of questions and have participants talk about them with a partner. Then ask the participants to look at the critical incidents and quote cards and explore other perspectives about each. Ask participants to speculate about how some of their friends from other cultures might answer the questions below. This activity is intended to motivate self-awareness of learners' (and the facilitator's) own cultural values and orientations.

1. Family

- Describe what the term “family” means to you.
- When you talk about your family, whom does that include?
- Do you put relationships or tasks first?

2. Community

- Describe what the term “community” means to you.
- Were you brought up in a community of people from your ethnic background?
- Do you now live in a community of people from your ethnic background?

3. Work

- Why did you choose the work you are doing now or are planning to do?
- Is this work similar to the work of your parents or grandparents?
- What do you consider to be rewarding work?
- What do you value at work? (e.g., independence, money, friendship, etc.)
- How do you view authority? For example, if a boss asks a subordinate to help with a task outside of work and outside of his or her job description, what would you advise?
- How are you expected to dress for work?

4. Customs

- What language do you use with your family, at work, and in your social environment?
 - What occasions and festivals do you celebrate?
 - What foods do you like to eat?
 - Have you always eaten these foods?
 - Does your culture of origin have special forms of address or titles for people who are older, have higher status, or special professions?
-
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5. Sense of space

- How do you like to be greeted?
- How close or distant do you like people to stand when next to you?
- What voice pitches and volume and what speed of spoken communication are you comfortable with?
- What gestures and body language do you find challenging or confusing? For example, do you make eye contact with some people but not others?
- What does eye contact mean to you?
- How do you define privacy? What kinds of questions do you consider to be an invasion of privacy?

6. Time

- What does time mean for you?
- What are some proverbs about time in your language? i.e. “A stitch in time saves nine.” “The early bird catches the worm.”
- What is “late” for you?
- What do you typically do if you are late?
- How do you react if someone else is late?
- Do you feel that time is plentiful or scarce?

Questions

Use these questions to explore the ideas and underlying values and beliefs in the stories and quotations.

Read the critical incident and answer the questions.

- What is the context? What is happening? What are the issues? Summarize.
- Can you relate to any of the characters or events? Why? How?
- What were the different expectations of the characters in the story?

Try a role play!

Imagine that this happened in your country of origin. How would the situation be similar or different? Act out the situation with a classmate. Act out an alternative outcome.

Looking for cultural clues

Developing the skill to see multiple perspectives is important for developing cultural competence. In this exercise, participants are asked to look at a critical incident and, using cultural knowledge, identify both characters' perspectives in the story. This activity uses the skills from the description, interpretation, and evaluation exercise by Milton and Jane Bennett referenced earlier in this guide.

1. Describe the situation.
2. Without using adjectives, list the behaviours of both characters.
3. List statements of inference.
4. Relate the behaviours from your perspective.
5. Attempt to understand the second individual's thinking about the first person's behaviours and values.
6. Expand your interpretation by thinking about an interaction you have had with someone from a different culture. Confirm or reject your understanding through further communication or observation.

Cultural Orientations

Cultural orientations serve as generalizations about the motivations and values that influence people's behaviours and actions and provide clues to better understand them. Exploring cultural orientations is an enjoyable way to expand cultural knowledge and to deepen one's cultural awareness.¹⁰

This activity guide highlights and very briefly describes four cultural orientations:

- Orientation to self
(Individualism/collectivism)
- Orientation to time
(Monochronic/polychronic)
- Orientation to power
(High power and low power distance)
- Communication
(Direct, indirect, and non-verbal communication)

¹⁰ For more on cultural orientations, see Schmitz, 2003, Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005, and Storti, 1999.

Activities:

- Introduce one cultural orientation. Ask participants which description they identify with most.
- Introduce all of the orientations and ask students to read through the quote cards or the critical incidents in order to identify whether an orientation might be at the root of the misunderstanding, assumptions, or attitudes portrayed.

Orientation to self

Which question would more typically come to mind when you face a problem?

A. What can I do to accomplish what I need?

OR B. Who do I know who can help me accomplish this?

In an individualistic society, the smallest unit is the individual. Being self-sufficient and putting one's needs before those of the group can conflict directly with a collectivist world view in which the family unit is usually the smallest unit and considering the needs of others in the group is a means of protecting oneself.¹¹

¹¹ For more information about how this orientation influences the workplace, see Laroche and Rutherford, 2007.

Orientation to power

Which statement is more typical of you?

A. Interactions between a boss and a subordinate are generally formal.

OR B. Interactions between a boss and a subordinate are generally informal.

Power distance¹² refers to the distribution of power in an organization. Equality and hierarchy are two key cultural components that make up organizational arrangements. Every culture retains elements of both but tends to value one more than the other.

Cultures that emphasize equality believe power inequalities are artificial. Those in power try to minimize the differences between themselves and subordinates to create an egalitarian work environment; they try to delegate and share power as much as possible. Decisions are made by consensus when possible, and employees are encouraged to take initiative.

Cultures that emphasize hierarchy accept that some will have more power than others. Managers do not easily delegate power, and they distinguish themselves from those who have less. Managers accept the responsibilities that come with power and often look after those beneath them. Subordinates are not encouraged to take initiative and are closely supervised.

¹² For more information about how power distance plays out in the workplace, see Laroche & Rutherford, 2007

Orientation to time

Which statement is more typical of you?

A. Interruptions cannot usually be avoided and are often quite beneficial.

OR B. Interruptions should be avoided wherever possible; they are inefficient and are sometimes rude.

In monochronic cultures, people prefer to focus their time on one task or person at a time, and this is considered well-mannered. In polychronic cultures, people will more readily interrupt a task to attend to another task or relationship (Storti, 1999).

More questions about time:

1. How do you feel when someone keeps you waiting for a long time?
2. Do you find yourself rushing the conversation when you know you have very little time to spend with someone?
3. What proverbs do you know that express a cultural orientation toward time in your culture? (E.g., “Time is money”—time is something to be managed and spent.)

Direct and indirect communication

Which statement is more typical of you?

A. If saying no is impolite and saying yes might mislead, then saying nothing can be the polite way of saying no. This saves face and preserves harmony.

OR B. Some people don't like it when others “beat around the bush.” Just say what you mean.

In direct cultures, people tend to “say it like it is.” In indirect cultures, much is understood from what is not said, by what is implied or hinted at, and direct confrontation is usually avoided to maintain harmony.

The concept of “face”

As people grow up, they adopt certain claims about their characteristics and traits and make these claims implicitly or sometimes explicitly. Thus, in every situation, everyone is putting forward a certain “face.” At times this “face” is called into question explicitly (e.g. calling someone a liar) or implicitly (e.g. talking down to someone, questioning his competence) (Ting-Toomey, 1999).

Non-verbal communication

Communicating without words has many components. These include how we look, how we move, how we sound, how we smell, eye contact, the use of time and space, tone of voice, loudness, speed, facial expression, body posture, touching, and smiling (Samovar & Porter, 2004).

Some non-verbal communication is general to all cultures: anger, fear, happiness, sadness, surprise, and disgust.

There are rules for displaying emotion that are culturally grounded and also context-sensitive.

Some non-verbal communication is culture-specific. For example, in some cultures, people shake their heads to indicate “yes,” while in other cultures people indicate “yes” by moving their heads from side to side like a pendulum.

What are some of the pitfalls of non-verbal communication?

- Misattribution
- Sending the wrong signal
- Missing the signal
- Getting the wrong context

Strategies for successful non-verbal behaviour across cultures include the following:

1. Changing how you behave and how you understand others' non-verbal communication is the key to successful non-verbal communication across cultures.
2. Be aware of others' behaviours and how these affect you. Often we are not aware of the source of our impressions of others. Unexpected and unfamiliar non-verbal behaviours can cause strong responses at an emotional level. Resist the temptation to make hasty, judgmental evaluations.
3. Be aware of your own non-verbal communication.
4. Try to match your behaviours to those of the culture you are interacting with.

Activity:

Read through the quote cards and critical incidents. Find examples where non-verbal behaviour contributes to misunderstanding. Discuss the different views of what constitutes acceptable non-verbal behaviour from different cultural perspectives.

- What are some Canadian norms?
- What kinds of messages are sent through non-verbal communication?
- What are some of the non-verbal behaviours you have seen that differ from your norms?

Sorting/categories

This activity works especially well with the quote cards. Hand out a set of quote cards to small groups of students. Instruct them to read through the cards and sort them into categories of their choice. Once they have sorted the cards, each group must then name the categories and explain their selection criteria. If the groups have been introduced to the iceberg metaphor, the instructor can point out how the categories fit within the iceberg. Most elements will probably fall into the hidden part of the iceberg.

Glossary of Terms

Cultural awareness: The self-examination and in-depth exploration of one's own cultural background (Camphina-Bacote, 1998).

Cultural competence: The dynamic combination of cultural self-awareness, knowledge, skill, and encounter fed by interest in culture. The awareness of one's own and others' cultures coupled with an ability to communicate effectively and respectfully across cultures. Developing cultural competence is a lifelong process.

Cultural disorientation/culture shock: "The psychological disorientation most people experience when they move into a culture markedly different from their own. It comes from the experience of encountering ways of doing, organizing, perceiving, or valuing...that are different from yours, and that threaten your basic, unconscious belief that your culture's customs, assumptions, values, and behaviours are right." (Kohls, 2001).

Cultural knowledge: The result of seeking and obtaining a sound understanding of culturally diverse groups.

Cultural norms: The collective understanding of and expectations regarding what constitutes proper or improper behaviour in a given situation (Olsen, 1978). Cultural traditions, beliefs, and values intersect to influence the development of collective norms within a cultural or ethnic community.

Cultural skill: This skill includes the ability to perform cultural assessments, communicate effectively, and reflect and continually build self-awareness.

Cultural values: A set of priorities that identify and guide desirable or undesirable behaviours and fair or unfair actions.

Culturally shared beliefs: A set of fundamental assumptions that people hold to be true without question. These beliefs can revolve around questions about the origins of human beings; the concepts of time and space; reality; the existence of a supernatural being(s); and the meaning of life, death, and the afterlife.

Culturally shared traditions: These traditions (e.g., celebrating Kwanza, Ramadan, or Thanksgiving) can be shaped by and include myths, legends, ceremonies, and rituals that are passed on from one generation to the next via oral and written mediums.

Culture-general: An approach to diversity that involves developing cultural sensitivity by constructing a framework for understanding dynamics and interactions that occur across and between cultures without taking a rigorously anthropological look at any specific culture.

Culture-specific: An approach to diversity that focuses on individual cultural differences. Developing this approach can involve education and training about cultural practices and values, including do's and taboos.

Culture: A learned system of meanings that fosters a particular sense of shared identity and community among its group members. Members of a culture learn the meanings of right and wrong that produce particular consequences in a community.

Discrimination: Differential treatment that favours one individual, group, or object over another. The source of discrimination is prejudice, and the actions associated with it are not systematized.

Ethnocentrism: To hold particular views and standards and to make positive or negative judgments about other groups based on one's own group's values and practices.

Immigrants: Persons who have left their nation of birth to dwell in another country. Note that there is a distinction between immigrant children and children of immigrant parents. There are also legal immigrants who differ from undocumented immigrants in that the latter do not have legal status.

Prejudice: A subjective attitude, opinion, or feeling formed without prior knowledge, thought, or objective reason.

Racism: Racial prejudice and discrimination supported by institutional power and authority that is used to the advantage of one "race" and the disadvantage of others. The critical element that differentiates racism from prejudice and discrimination is racism's use of institutional power and authority to support prejudice and enforce discriminatory behaviours in systematic ways that affect social structures and outcomes.

Refugee: Owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion, a refugee lives outside the country of his or her nationality and is unable or, owing to fear, unwilling to avail him- or herself of the protection of that country (definition adopted by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees; more information is accessible at <http://www.unhcr.org/>).

Stereotype: Cognitive method or procedure used by the mind to simplify the complex barrage of information it experiences. From this perspective, a stereotype is a method of understanding, which works through classifying individual people into a group category. This definition of stereotype, however, omits the important issue of content. As a “typical picture” about a social group, a stereotype may be accurate or inaccurate, justified or unjustified. It is though, the negative, the inaccurate, and the unjustified stereotypes that cause us most concern (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004).

Critical Incidents Reference Guide

	Cultural Orientation	Themes
1	Universalism/Particularism Power Distance Hierarchy/Equality	
2	Individualism/Collectivism Space: Private/Public	Death/Dying Customs
3	Face Individualism/Collectivism Power Distance	Cheating Teacher/Student Discipline
4	Individualism/Collectivism Communication: High/Low Context	Relationship Building
5	Competitiveness Thinking Learning Style	Knowledge
6	Communication: Formal/Informal Direct/Indirect Power Distance	Apologizing Humour

	Cultural Orientation	Themes
7	Communication: Direct/Indirect Space: Private/Public	Negotiation
8	Non-Verbal Communication Power Distance Communication: Direct/Indirect	Conflict Teacher/Student Roles
9	Communication: Direct/Indirect Time	
10	Individualism/Collectivism Communication: Direct/Indirect Time	Relationship/Task
11	Communication Power Distance	Respect Apologies/Excuses
12	Power Distance Individualism/Collectivism	Respect Parenting Discipline
13	Non-Verbal Communication	

	Cultural Orientation	Themes
14	Time	Death/Dying Customs
15	Non-Verbal Communication Formal/Informal	Gender Roles
16	Space: Private/Public	Gender Roles
17	Communication Hierarchy/Equality	Gender Roles
18	Communication Space	
19	Communication: Direct/Indirect Non-Verbal	Work Ethic
20	Interpersonal Distance and Touch	
21		Culture Shock Acculturation

Critical Incident Cards

School

1. A student was not satisfied with her new class. She wanted to move to a higher class. First, she consulted the student advisor who said that she could not move up at this time. The student, still unsatisfied with this answer, asked the other student advisor. The second student advisor gave her the same answer. Next, she made an appointment to see the coordinator of the Language Training Program. The coordinator consulted the student's teacher and the student's test scores and explained to the student that, according to the guidelines, she was unable to move to the next level at that time. The student was still not satisfied and made an appointment to see the dean and then intended to talk to the president of the college. Meanwhile, the teacher couldn't understand why the student did not just accept her decision. She also could not understand why the student could not see that there were policies in place so that no matter how high up she went in the college hierarchy, it would not change the outcome for her.

2. Jane entered her classroom after the morning coffee break and saw a group of students looking at photos. A young woman in her twenties was showing the photos. The photos were of a three-month-old infant. The teacher commented that the baby was very cute. Then the teacher noticed that the baby was in a coffin and, after a pause, commented that the baby had died. The woman said yes, and then the teacher asked her a few more questions about the child. The teacher was surprised. This group of students had been together for only two weeks. Later, the word "undertaker" came up as a vocabulary word in the same class. When the teacher explained the meaning, the student went on to describe in detail the process of preparing her baby's body for burial. The teacher wondered if she should talk to the student privately to explain that some people might be uncomfortable with this topic. The teacher certainly was!
3. Sandra gave her students a grammar test. During the test, a student was looking at another student's answers and writing them on his paper. The teacher asked him to do the test on his own. The student continued to look at the other student's answers. The teacher took his paper away and threw it into the garbage in full view of all the other students to make the point that the student's answers were not an indication of his understanding of the grammar and that it was pointless to write the test if he was just going to cheat. The student was very upset and went to the office to complain.

4. My friend liked her class, but she felt that the teacher was very cold. She said the teacher just taught grammar and never asked about the students' families or talked about her own.
5. Mark entered his LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada) class on the first day and introduced himself to the class. The first lesson was designed to work on all four skills and to give students the chance to get to know their teacher. Mark began by telling the students that he, too, was an immigrant to Canada and that he was going to share his biography with the class. Their first assignment was to ask him questions and take notes about what they heard. Next, they had to write several paragraphs about him and hand it in later that week. On the day that it was due, all the students had done the work except for one. Mark asked her why she had not done her homework, and she answered that she did not need to know about him. Mark explained that the assignment was designed to work on a variety of specific English skills that she needed to improve her ability to communicate in English. After that, she did not really participate in class. She did her own work and paid attention only when there was something that interested her.

6. Sandra is a fun-loving teacher teaching in the LINC program. At the beginning of every course, she explains the classroom and school guidelines, including the rule about being late. After about a week and a half, one of her students started to arrive late for class every morning. Sandra likes to treat things in a light-hearted manner, and so when the student walked in late one morning, Sandra said "good evening" to her and everyone laughed. Sandra had done this before with other students. The student ignored Sandra and went and sat down. Sandra felt a little annoyed and so she asked the student about being late. The student then yelled at Sandra and said, "You don't talk to me like that!" Sandra told her that she should apologize for being late. Later, Sandra approached her privately and apologized to her even though she felt that the student should apologize first. The student also apologized but later stopped coming to class altogether.

7. Len teaches the evening TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) class. One day there was a conflict between a student who wanted to do more listening practice in class and a student who wanted to focus only on grammar. The next day, one of the two students came to Len's office to talk to him about the class. She told him that she thought they had studied enough grammar and that they needed more listening practice. She assured him that she was not trying to tell him what to teach. A week later she invited Len to come to her home so that she could show him something. He did not go. Then she sent him an e-mail, thanking him for his teaching and complimenting him on his looks. This made him very uncomfortable, so he made a conscious attempt to avoid her outside of class.

8. Jacquie taught English for 10 years in China and Japan. When she returned to Canada, she started teaching in the LINC program. She really enjoyed the multicultural classroom and felt challenged to meet the learning needs of her diverse class. She was, however, having a lot of trouble with one student who seemed very glum and critical. This student, 45, had a doctoral degree (also called Ph.D.) from her country. She never smiled in class and seemed to test Jacquie every time she taught grammar or vocabulary. In fact, Jacquie felt that the student enjoyed upsetting her. One day, Jacquie confronted the student in class and told her that she should change to another class if she was not satisfied. The student didn't leave after this confrontation but seemed more content and did not second-guess Jacquie after that.

9. There is a student in my class who is always late. That is not the only problem. When I ask him a question, he goes on and on and on and makes the rest of the class wait and wait. I want to tell him to get to the point. Finally, I have to cut him off because he loses track of the time he is taking up in class on his issue. I tell him that if he wants to continue talking about it, he'll have to do it on his coffee break. He doesn't understand our concept of time. We are on a strict schedule and things have to be done by a certain time; as well, things are scheduled to take a certain amount of time. I don't like it either—I hate it.

10. It was break time and two students were having a conversation in the hallway. When the break was over, Janet called everyone back to class. The two students continued their conversation. When Janet asked them to come in, one of the students looked at her as if to say, “you are so abrupt and rude. You want me to return to class? Can’t you see that I am in the middle of a social conversation?” Janet felt annoyed.
11. George really infuriated me because when it was time to hand in his assignment, he gave me a whole bunch of lame excuses. It really upset me because I felt that he was not taking his work seriously and did not pay attention to the deadlines. I explained the assignment very carefully and put the deadlines up on the board—so when he made up excuses to cover himself, he really made me mad. I felt bad, though, because there was another student who didn’t have his assignment done either, but he apologized and said he’d hand it in later that day. He never did hand it in on that day; he handed it in a few days later, but since he had apologized, somehow I accepted that and was nice to him.

Community

12. A man in his early twenties was walking home from school one day when he passed by a small group of girls of junior high school age. The girls laughed at him, and he felt very upset and disrespected. If he had been at home, he would have disciplined them right there in the street and then taken them home to their fathers and the fathers would have supported him. He knew that he couldn’t do that here.
13. A young woman had recently arrived in Canada ready to start a new life. She found the weather a little cold but still enjoyed wearing the same style she wore at home—tight skirts and tight tops that had low necklines. After about a month, she began to notice people staring at her. She thought they were looking at her because she was a foreigner. Then one day someone told her that only prostitutes dressed that way. She felt angry and insulted.
14. A man was walking past a cemetery when he noticed something very odd. To make sure he wasn’t mistaken, he went in to take a closer look. He was very surprised to see two names on the tombstone he was looking at. One was the name of someone who had already died, and next to it was the name of someone who was still living. The tombstone had a birth date but no death date on it. He just couldn’t believe it!

15. Two women in their late fifties were walking along the street holding hands when a truck drove by and the passenger shouted “lesbo”¹³ at them. They were very upset that people thought they were lesbians, and so they stopped holding hands like that. They couldn’t understand why some people had a problem with two women holding hands. It is a normal thing to do.
16. Irene and her husband recently met a couple that had just immigrated to Canada. Irene and her husband were having a party at their house, so they decided to invite their new friends. When the couple arrived, there were three other couples there already. The man entered and shook hands with the men but not with any of the women. Irene was insulted.
17. A man commented one day that the reason there are so many single women in Canada is that they are lazy. His female friend was surprised and insulted by his attitude.

Workplace

18. Peter went downtown to an office to pick up some documents. When he arrived, he went to the front desk and talked to the receptionist. The receptionist was very helpful and seemed to go out of his way to make sure Peter wouldn’t have any trouble getting what he needed. Peter was very happy with the service and thought about how different it was from the service in his country. About half an hour later, he was just getting ready to leave the office when he realized that he had one more question. The receptionist was not at his desk, but Peter saw him in the hallway so he rushed out to catch him. Instead of helping Peter, the man told him that he was on his break and that Peter would have to wait until he got back. Peter was surprised by the receptionist’s response.

¹³ Derogatory term directed towards women who identify their sexual orientation as gay or lesbian

19. Mary was working in a laboratory at the university as part of a work placement program. She really enjoyed her job and felt that things were going very well. She worked hard and took her job very seriously. Her work placement supervisor thought things were working out well until he talked to the professor in charge of the lab. The professor said things were not going well. He also felt he would have to let Mary go because there had been a lot of interpersonal problems since her arrival.
20. A woman who was new to Canada was placed in a teaching assistant position at a junior high school. One of the tasks she was asked to do was to mark a sex education assignment in which students had to categorize behaviours as sexual intimacy or not. The teaching assistant had to approach her co-operating teacher and explain that she could not mark the assignment without being given some benchmarks to go by because the standards for sexual behavioural norms are very different in this culture.

Acculturation/Culture Shock

21. I have a lot of resistance to learning English because I didn't really choose to be here. I had to leave my home because my life was being threatened and my family's life was being threatened. I never really wanted to leave, but I had to because I was doing an investigation into some people who had gone missing. I can't help feeling resistant to being here; I feel like I am losing my identity. I am a mathematics professor, but here I can barely express simple thoughts in English. I feel stupid. All I want to do is teach math again. In class I like to translate new words into Spanish—it feels comfortable, but my teacher gets annoyed when I do that. It is so frustrating to feel like I am starting all over again from nothing. I just want to speak my language and teach math.

Quote Cards

Community/Lifestyle

1. “People are very sociable when they are in the office, but outside they are very busy.”
2. “In this place people have many things to do, so they don’t have time to help.”
3. “Why are people in such a hurry?”
4. “In my culture women are socialized to be quiet and not to shout. Also, it is very rude to interrupt when someone else is speaking.”
5. “People don’t seem to be ashamed of divorce here. In my country we never talk about it because it is humiliating.”
6. “Canada is a credit society. Your mistakes follow you. In my country the infrastructure is poor, so mistakes can’t follow.”
7. “I don’t think they understand that one minute late is one minute late—black and white.”
8. “They don’t understand why they can’t come ten minutes late.”

9. “We expect that if you get something for free, you should appreciate it.”

Being a Newcomer

10. “There are so many bills to pay here.”
11. “That is just the way we do it here.”
12. “I used my food money to buy a bus ticket.”
13. “It was different here because I didn’t know how the system worked in the first place.”
14. “If I knew then what I know now, I would have known that I was being treated unfairly—but you come and just figure that’s the way things are.”
15. “You can’t bargain with clerks at stores in Canada!”
16. “There is so much snow and it is cold...so cold.”
17. “I would not have moved if my country was peaceful.”
18. “My goal is to get a job. This is the most important thing for me and everything leads to that. Last month I used all the family money to buy a very expensive instrument that I use in my profession so that I can practise. I must practise to keep my skills sharp so that I can get a job.”

School: Teaching and Learning

19. “When a student makes a mistake here, the teacher says ‘good, good’ and doesn’t correct it. If it is wrong, it is wrong, and the teacher’s job is to correct our mistakes.”
20. “When the teacher enters, the students should stand up. Students should also stand when they ask a question.”
21. “In my country, standing to answer a question shows respect, and in my country there are so many students that it makes it easier to know who is talking.”
22. “If my teacher is speaking to me and is standing, I must stand because it is disrespectful to sit when the person you are talking to is standing.”
23. “The teacher is not strong enough. If she gives a time limit for the test, then when the time is up, a student should not be able to say ‘wait, wait.’”
24. “Students cheat because they want to look good to the teacher.”
25. “A good teacher can make you have a good mark.”
26. “In my country, if the program is free, then the teacher must not be very good.”

27. “In my country, if you get caught cheating, you get kicked out, so a teacher doesn’t want to catch a student and ruin his or her future.”
28. “In my country, we must prepare very carefully because the score is very important and it is highly competitive.”
29. “In Canada students make lots of mistakes but the teacher says ‘good.’ Teachers should criticize children [students]; it is good for children to remember their mistakes.”
30. “If a person is late or absent, you’ve really got to drill into them that they’re supposed to tell the teacher why they are absent—but a lot of times they won’t, so it kind of makes me think [the teachers] are...just not interested.”
31. “We have a certain amount of expertise and it is up to them [students] to take it.”
32. “They just cheat so much.”
33. “Some students just do whatever they want. They are so rude.”
34. “In my country, we must prepare very carefully because the score is VERY important and it is highly competitive.”

35. “The way I look at it is this: as adults, I would naturally just trust that if they were away, it was for a good reason and it’s really none of my business why they were gone, and the only reason I ask is because I know it is school policy and I know that some students have a different interpretation of what a valid reason is.”

Communication

36. “People here don’t say what they mean. It is artificial.”

37. “They just do what they want. They are so rude.”

38. “My classmate smells really bad. I can’t work with him.”

39. “My classmate burps. It is disgusting.”

40. “When you don’t speak English, people assume your intelligence is [at] the same level as your English.”

41. “I am polite and I expect others to be polite.”

42. “I worked as a seamstress for a while in Toronto. There were some women who also worked there. They were always fighting together, and then later they would just talk to each other in a friendly way like nothing had happened. It was so confusing.”

43. “My Canadian co-workers think I am unfriendly at work, but when I work, I don’t chat—and besides, they just seem to talk about nothing. It feels uncomfortable, so I am going to quit.”

44. “Thank you means nothing in this country—it is cheap...it is so common that it is worth nothing.”

45. “One day I met a student at London Drugs and I was so embarrassed when she came up to me and kissed me on the cheek, but that was just the way she greeted people.”

46. “I don’t trust him and I can’t tell if he is telling the truth or not.”

47. “In my country, we address an older person as ‘Auntie’ or ‘Uncle’ even if they are not related.”

48. “I think, too, that it is very important that you are quite honest with the students, because sometimes I don’t think we are. I think we kind of skirt issues and we are not direct.”

49. “If you go look for a job and you don’t smile, you won’t have a job for long, so get used to it.”

50. “Sometimes we have to make sure we set expectations in the class. Like this is how it is done, you know, and this is also how it is done in an office and outside. It is not just within here: there are certain rules that you need to follow in a work situation, in a school situation.”

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