

# **DIVERSITY MATTERS**



**Welcoming, Working with, and  
Enjoying our Diversity**

**An online seminar  
for  
Capilano University**

**Prepared by Naya Kee  
Conflict Resolution Advisor  
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# DIVERSITY MATTERS



## Introduction

The Capilano University community comes from all over the globe. At last count, we represent 49 countries. Fully 29% of our student body speaks English as their second, or even third, language. It can truly be said that we work in a global village. How can we make the most of this new world and do our best for each other?

This seminar will take you through some important information, exercises and skills, all designed to support us to welcome, work with and enjoy our diversity.

## Brainstorming Our Differences

The differences among us go well beyond those of nationality and language.

Consider these:

age

physical ability

religion

marital status

gender

parental status

income

sexual orientation

social class

mental ability

These group characteristics bring with them cultural differences, that is, differences in our ways of doing and our ways of thinking.

## Getting Comfortable with Differences

It is very human to be uncomfortable with differences. For example, if your emotional temperature is relatively cool you will not usually be at ease with people who show anger or weep as a normal part of everyday life. And they might find you a bit of cold fish.

Cultures that value straight-shooting, direct communication can be labelled by people who communicate in a more round-about way as crude, even harsh. From the perspective of the straight-shooting types, taking a more indirect approach can easily be judged as evasive, even untrustworthy.

Negative stereotypes like these are born when we are blindly attached to the "rightness" of *our* way and interpret differences as wrong-headed. To work effectively with differences we must shift from negative judgment to understanding.

Cultural groups (whether that's an age group, a nationality, a gender...) do have norms of behaviour and belief but remember that within any given cultural group there will be lots of individuals who do not fit the norm. That's part of diversity too.

## Knowledge is Crucial



While being aware of the pitfalls of stereotyping, it is vitally important to know as much as possible about the typical characteristics of the cultural groups we are working with. With this knowledge we will more readily understand the intentions and needs behind the other's actions, be able to avoid embarrassing or potentially wounding actions of our own and respond constructively.

Understanding is the most powerful antidote to negative judgment and prejudice and the unkind behaviour that so often comes with them.

### Resources:

- Your colleagues. Regularly compare notes and approaches on the "difficult" behaviours you are encountering. Rather than an "Ain't it awful!" approach, try to understand the behaviour and brainstorm effective new responses.
- [Wikipedia](#) is a good source for cultural information organized by country.
- The pop psych book, *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*, is a good introduction to some basic ways the genders differ in our needs and behaviours.
- [Culturegrams](#) are information-rich 4 page summaries of basic information on different countries, including cultural characteristics.
- Here at Cap we have local experts: the International Student Centre, First Nations Student Services and Disability Services.

## Know Yourself



Equally important as being knowledgeable about the culture of others is to understand our own cultural characteristics. We usually assume that we know the “right” thing to do and the “right” way to do it. However, most of our beliefs are cultural habits of mind, not rules or views that are helpful or even useful to apply automatically to any all and situations.

Here are four scenarios with a few of the enormous range of thoughts we might react with. Which thoughts resonate with you? Which one or more perspectives is likely to result in positive relating?

A student is trying to bargain a lower price for a University course.

- What a waste of my time.
- This isn't a garage sale!
- I wonder if this is normal in her culture?
- I need to be firm, understanding and patient in saying no and explaining how things work here.
- This person must be crazy!

An employee comes back 3, 4, even 5 times to try to get something you have consistently refused before.

- This is way too pushy!
- I'm going to have to set him straight once and for all.
- Who does he think he is!
- Maybe this is a cultural thing. I need to cool down.
- This guy is pretty determined. I'll reconsider.

A student said “That's a good idea” when you suggested that he write a paper on a particular topic but he wrote on something else.

- That's weird. I remember him saying he would do his paper on that.
- I was sure we'd agreed on that topic.
- Hmm, I wonder if he was just being agreeable. Still he should have been clear with me.
- I read somewhere that people from his culture are often agreeably indirect when they disagree. Maybe that happened here.

A colleague says, "We must have lunch" and never follows up.

- Well there's a really insincere person. Guess I can't trust him.
- That's hurtful. What a jerk!
- What did I do wrong?
- I wonder if it was more like a friendly gesture than an actual invitation?
- I'll give him another chance. Maybe he thinks I'm supposed to make the next move.

Situations like this happen every day. The key is not to assume that the other person sees the situation the same way we do and is going against the grain to irritate or oppose us. In fact, when a person's behaviour is "out there" as far as we're concerned, there's a good chance that our own cultural norms are behind our negative interpretations and reactions. In a diverse environment we often misread the intent and meaning of others' words and behaviour. Knowing that snap negative judgments will often be misinformed helps us to notice those very reactions and then get curious about the other person's perspective.

## Areas of Potential Misunderstanding

There are a number of areas where cultural miscues commonly happen. While we all want to feel comfortable, respected, and accepted, different cultures have quite different ways of communicating these things. Consider the questions after each example.

### Body Language



**Eye contact:** What does not making eye contact mean to you? What other interpretations are possible? For some cultural groups, steady eye contact is considered rude and invasive and is avoided.

**Nodding:** Are Western head gestures (nodding head for yes, shaking head for no) universal? Have you encountered other head gestures with other meanings? For example, moving the chin from side to side for people from India means "Okay, okay".

**Silence:** There is a lull in the conversation and the other stays silent. Does this mean the other person is relaxed? Anxious? Making room for you to say something? Confused? Some people and cultures are totally relaxed with silence and find it companionable; others find it intensely uncomfortable and alienating. What about you?

**Distance:** When is someone too far away or too close for comfort? We all have a distance we like others to keep. Some cultural groups like being nose to nose.



**Touch:** Where do you draw the line with touch? Location, duration, pressure, relationship, gender, permission, and occasion all play into our actions and responses. How we weigh these factors has everything to do with our cultural background.

## Emotionality

**Crying:** Do you turn away to give some privacy, move in to comfort, or freeze? For some cultures quietly sitting with another's tears is considered respectful and caring. Others expect active comforting and still others require privacy to save face while they are upset.

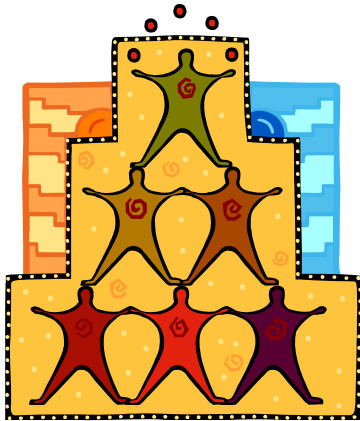
**Anger:** How do you see anger? For some of us showing anger is pretty much always disrespectful and not okay. For others the verbal expression of anger is seen as more natural, less threatening.

**Emotional tone of communication:** What do you think of communication that uses lots of gestures, a loud and highly expressive voice, fast talking and regular interruptions: Is this rude? Crazy? Enjoyable? Normal? Informative? What about conversations that are quiet, orderly, cool, without much emotionality of tone or gesture?

## Decision-making

There are many different ways decisions can be made. The way our own culture does it feels normal and sensible. Consider this range of decision-making approaches.

**By whom:** individual or group, particular family member? Is it more natural for you to make your decisions on your own or to refer them to your group (family? organization? friends?). When the father comes forward to make a decision for an adult child, how do you react?



**Hierarchical/collaborative/consultative?** This is a huge topic. In some contexts a culture may be collaborative, for example in students working together, but hierarchical in terms of deference to authority. There are many possible gradations and combinations.

**Based on what criteria:** moral/financial/traditional/social...? Many cultures will put tradition ahead of financial considerations, for example, whereas for others tradition is hardly on the radar and individual achievement, perhaps, will be the governing consideration.

### **Actions**

The significance of actions may be misunderstood. The offering and taking of food can be fraught with misunderstanding, for example. In some cultures it is seen as rude to refuse any offer of food, in others it is considered polite to keep on offering until a person refuses. Imagine the misunderstanding that happens when these two cultures meet for a meal!

### **Values**

Which values are more basic may differ. For example, for some obeying the rules is more valued than loyalty to a friend. How quickly passionate negative stereotypes could come up in response to a story about a man who by honestly answering a police officer's questions exposed his friend to trouble with the law.

## **Respectful Communication**

The need for acceptance and respect are universal across cultures. How those things are given and signalled will differ but some ways of behaving we can be quite confident will be well received by everyone.

When the other person is having difficulty understanding you, try the following:

- Speak a little more slowly.
- Speak clearly.
- Use short sentences and simple vocabulary.
- Don't raise your voice.
- Go back to the last point you know the person understood and begin again in slower, smaller steps.
- Do not use jargon, plays on words, jokes or complex negatives.
- Do not treat the person as if they are less intelligent than you are.
- Be patient.



## **Communicating in Conflict**

We have a double challenge when there is a cross-cultural dimension to a conflict situation. As well as following all of the guidelines above, here are some very wise ground rules:

- **DON'T TAKE IT PERSONALLY.** It's not about you. Focus on the situation.
- **DO NOT LET THEM LOSE FACE.** As well as staying calm and nonjudgmental, this may mean having the conversation in private.
- **LET THE UPSET PERSON VENT THEIR FEELINGS AND EXPLAIN THE SITUATION.** It's taken them a long time to get this upset. They need to blow off steam.
- **USE THE PERSON'S NAME.** Lets them know you believe they are worthy of respect.
- **TAKE NOTES.** Saves the other person from having to repeat themselves and gives importance to their message.
- **ASK QUESTIONS** to fill in gaps in the information and confirm details. Shows you take the problem seriously and are looking for a workable solution.
- **APOLOGIZE.** Even though it may not be your fault, an apology can be a simple expression of sympathy and can make the other person feel better.

- **TAKE RESPONSIBILITY.** Take on the task of making the next step happen, e.g., "I'm sorry, I don't know the answer to that question but let me find out for you."
- **DO YOUR BEST TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM RIGHT AWAY.**
- **KEEP YOUR PROMISES.**
- **CONFIRM THE DETAILS**

When these skills are not enough to defuse the situation, follow these guidelines:

- **WHEN YOU KNOW THE SKILLS WON'T WORK, RETREAT.**
- **NEVER ATTEMPT TO NEGOTIATE WITH SOMEONE WHO VERBALLY OR PHYSICALLY THREATENS YOU OR HAS A WEAPON.**
- **IF YOU SENSE DANGER AT ALL, LEAVE THE AREA IMMEDIATELY AND CALL SECURITY.**

## **Culture Shock**



Every term hundreds of new international students come to Cap. All will experience some degree of culture shock. Imagine yourself at 19 years old in an entirely new country, far away from your family and friends, facing a strange city with all the challenges of getting around, new food, new course of study, new university with a complex and unfamiliar way of doing things and, on top of it all, speaking a second language that you have never lived in before.

For an entertaining and insightful student perspective on this transition see [International Student Experience, Culture Shock.](#)

There is a honeymoon when the newcomer still feels like a traveller, excited and elated. Then there's phase two. It's known as:

### **What am I doing here?**

- Everything feels so hard.
- The details of life like banking, transit, shopping, and paperwork are just tedious and difficult.
- I can't express myself with the humour and ease and clarity that I am used to- I feel stupid and misunderstood and this hurts.
- I don't know how to socialize in this new country.
- I am lonely, frustrated, and anxious, and I really miss my home.
- I am developing negative and simplistic ideas about Canadians and I just want to hang out with people from my own country.

For many students there is the serious additional pressure of family expectations. Often the entire family has saved and sacrificed so that this student can come here. They expect success.

Phase 3, **settling in**, comes with growing understanding of the culture the student has landed in and development of the skills to navigate it, patience, time and, hopefully, the support, understanding and patience of their hosts, us.

## **Diversity Resources**

### **Educational**

Kurucz, Paul, J. How to teach international students: a practical teaching guide for universities and colleges, 2008. Book is in Capilano University library collection.

Understanding Customer Diversity. 16 minutes. Borrow from the Conflict Resolution Advisor. Excellent training video.

International Student Experience. Approximately 1 hour in 5 parts on YouTube. Entertaining, intelligent and informative presentation to new international students at Columbia University in New York City.

Intercultural Competence: Interpersonal Communication Across Cultures. Myron Lustig and Jolene Koester. Book.

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