

Cultural Crossings:  
Using Stories to Inform Your Learning Journey

By

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Readers: If you find the frameworks in this paper valuable, the stories delightful or discomfoting, and the tips and techniques informative, please contact any one of the authors and let us know. If you have a story you wish to share, we would be thrilled to hear from you!

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# **Cultural Crossings: Using Stories to Inform Your Learning Journey**

## Introduction

The manner in which this paper came to be written is in itself a story. We, the authors - Joitske, Ancella and Meena - have some experience working in some of the cultures of Africa, Asia, Europe and North America. Each of us has our treasure-trove of stories about cross-cultural crossings that we have undertaken. We wanted to formalize what we have learned and evolve a community of practice, if possible. We hoped to accomplish this by initiating conversations with other professionals engaged in cross-cultural communities of practice, inviting them to share their stories and insights.

Several theoretical models and a robust body of academic and popular literature inform what we know about cross-cultural differences. The objective of our project was to link the conceptual approach provided by theories and models with the pragmatic and evocative understanding provided by stories.

We see the audience, potential users and beneficiaries of this work as others, who like ourselves, are called on to facilitate cross-cultural or global or dispersed communities of practice (CoP). We hope to provide a starter set of insights based on practice, that enables colleagues involved with such work to take yet another step on their own learning journey.

The frameworks and stories in this paper provide basic knowledge about how cross-cultural differences can impact group processes. This knowledge can help facilitators to anticipate group development issues and know better when and how to intervene or not. Our ideas and conclusions are incomplete and tentative; but we hope to have provided a foundation for future discussions and learning.

We suggest that the richness of diversity in cross-cultural CoPs (C3) can lead to very innovative CoPs. Members hold different values and have different ways of thinking. This may lead to new and useful ways of solving problems. At the same time the differences in values, thinking, beliefs and behaviors may make it more difficult to build the levels of

trust and identity that are essential for the CoP to function well.

So we started by looking for short stories about cross-cultural interactions that had been a source of discomfort or delight.

### Collecting and Analyzing Stories

At the outset, we agreed that the stories would be linked to interpretive questions, alternative explanations, and possible tips and techniques for facilitators. Our methodology and rationale is described below.

The challenge was to briefly describe memorable incidents that were initially surprising, puzzling, or confusing. What happened? Who was involved? What were the various reactions? The stories needed to evoke delight, discomfort, or even a sense of being disturbed. Each story was given a title and two-line teaser.

To provoke reflection, the stories were linked to one or two interpretive questions. The questions in turn aimed to elicit alternative explanations of what was actually happening.

Generating alternative explanations, in our view, is a critical technique for removing the blocks to positive working relationships between people from different cultures. The skill of generating alternative explanations may lie at the nexus of positive cross-cultural interactions - either leading to greater trust and stronger identity for the people involved, or just the opposite. Theoretically, this activity draws on the "Describe, Interpret, Evaluate" process (Jon Wendt, Stella Ting-Toomey) -- an excellent tool for double and triple checking personal reactions to a cross-cultural experience.

We think that the exercise of repeatedly linking stories of memorable incidents to interpretive questions to alternative explanations helps facilitators to develop greater cultural competence in themselves and others. What seems to happen is this: Embedded in the telling of any story are many possible explanations of what happened and why. Doubts and ambiguity about which of many different explanations is "the right one" helps individuals to resist

jumping to inaccurate conclusions about people from other cultures too quickly. What becomes evident is that additional information must be gathered in order to accurately understand people, especially how they view themselves.

Our short list of *alternative explanations* is naturally incomplete. Many different lenses can be used to explain surprising, puzzling, or confusing behavior. For example, as illustrated in the sections that follow, there can be cultural, personality based, situational, or random explanations for why a person/people talk and behave in a particular way in a specific situation.

We invite you to not only generate your *alternative explanations* (for the stories we have provided) but also to begin to collect your own stories. By combining *memorable incidents* with *interpretive questions* and *alternative explanations*, you can expand each of your stories into a scenario. We think this is one approach to your helping yourself and others to move forward on a cross-cultural learning journey.

We have also used our starter-set of scenarios to offer possible tips and techniques that can help facilitators who are dealing with similar situations. This list is short and partial, and meant to provoke readers' own creative problem solving processes. The greater value, we believe, comes from the process itself, by which facilitators can begin to put together tips and techniques for themselves - simply by listening to *memorable incidents*, asking *interpretive questions*, and generating *alternative explanations*.

#### Culling the Themes

The following 10 themes (which we loosely refer to as "strategies" and "competencies" in this paper) were culled by analyzing the 20 plus stories of intercultural interactions. The themes - once more an initial and partial list - highlight competencies and suggest strategies for building strong intercultural relationships.

While we believe that trust is by far the most important aspect of any intercultural relationship, it is last on our list because it is so difficult to achieve. Without trust, relationships are unlikely to flourish. Yet, because trust can be difficult to engender, we believe the actions,

thoughts, and insights under girding the other strategies may have to come first. Successfully applying these strategies - such as having common goals, understanding communication protocols, being aware of the importance of emotions - will help people build trust, which is the bedrock of deep, sustained relationships.

We view all these strategies as important and think they should be seen as a composite because they overlap and interact with each other. In real life, none have discrete beginnings and endings or work on their own. We also believe that the themes/strategies point toward cultural competencies that are important for individuals, facilitators and the groups with which they work.

They are:

1. Common goals and commitment
2. Communication protocols
3. Learning about self
4. Importance of emotions
5. Cultural brokers
6. Feedback
7. Resolving conflicts and misunderstandings
8. Surfacing and owning assumptions
9. Respect and openness
10. Importance of trust

### Stories, Issues, and a Few Tips and Techniques

#### **1. Common goals and commitment**

There are many issues, beliefs and ideas that can hinder intercultural interactions. However, finding common goals or sharing strong commitment can build a strong foundation for relationships. People who believe passionately in the same things can often find ways to communicate, build mutual respect and trust and work through conflicts because they believe that doing so will help them achieve their ultimate goals.

**Cliff Figallo: A Cisco tale**

In helping plan a virtual community for users of Cisco System products, the Marketing department was eager to create an environment where open dialogue could take place between Cisco and its customers. The Legal and Public Relations departments were resisting allowing Cisco employees to post anything in the public online forum, for fear of liability or leaking of trade secrets. But the customers were telling us that unless Cisco responded more quickly, they'd prefer to continue conversing through newsgroups and email lists in the public domain. We (Marketing and I) had to persuade the resisters that Cisco's active involvement would be a net positive for the company.

**Cliff Figallo: An old, old (true) story**

In 1971, 300 San Francisco-style hippies arrived in a caravan of school buses in the rural Bible Belt of the Deep South (USA)...to settle on a large piece of land. The local folks were mostly evangelical Christians who rarely encountered other cultures. They were horrified, but they did have another strange (Amish) community nearby, and there was a local labor shortage for many of their farming and logging operations. All of their young people tended to leave the area as soon as they were adults. The hippies offered to be civil, honest, hard-working students of the local experts in farming and lumber milling. In exchange, the locals taught the hippies how to live on the land and allowed them to build their own community as new - but still strange - neighbors. It turned out to be a win-win solution when it could have been a violent disaster.

<b>Theme: Common goals and commitment</b>			
<b>Story</b>	<b>Interpretative question</b>	<b>Alternative explanations</b>	<b>Possible tips &amp; techniques for facilitators</b>
A Cisco tale	What contributed to overcoming the differences between the two departments?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Common interest (net positive for company) between the two departments</li> <li>* Dialogue (in fact: persuasive dialogue)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Stress common goal and interests rather than differences.</li> <li>* Communicate and communicate.</li> <li>* Acknowledge differences even while stressing similarities</li> </ul>
An old, old (true) story	What made this a win-win situation?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Mutually dependent needs: Need for labour and need to learn farming and find a place for a community</li> <li>* Experience with another culture/ community</li> <li>* Willingness (from the Christians) to give it</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Look out for interdependence (win-win situations) to overcome resistance by fear of the unknown/difference.</li> <li>* Find ways to create a constructive</li> </ul>

		a try * Willingness from hippies to understand others view and flexibility to accommodate (be hardworking, civil etc.) * Probably lots of constructive communication * Finding ways to build respect about what others bring	curiosity about others * Teach perspective taking techniques
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## 2. Communication protocols

Because intercultural work can involve multiple languages (including professional jargon), facilitators must be sensitive to communication protocols. Such protocols include knowing in which language to converse when dealing with bi- or multi-lingual people; knowing in which language to converse when only some people in the conversation are bi- or multi-lingual; recognizing meaning variations for people who speak the same language, but who are from different countries; understanding the positive and detrimental aspects of using humor cross-nationally; and knowing and respecting the meaning of non-verbal gestures, tones and general body language.

### ***Meena Wilson: Planning the conference***

This big event was going to be jointly sponsored by two companies. The team included three senior administrators from each organization, and I was one of the reps from my company. We had held three one-hour teleconferences over 3 months. But the planning was going nowhere, and we decided to meet for a 2-day session at the other company's site and get all the details worked out.

There were the usual polite greetings. Then we dived into the work! What a pleasant surprise to discover that though the planning team members were from North America, Singapore, Malaysia, and India, we spoke each others' language - literally and figuratively! We were united in what we wanted to accomplish with the conference. Each person spoke their mind, and we listened and challenged each other's views. So, we became united in how we would achieve our goals.

The two days we spent together were lovely and I still have warm feelings when I think of the five other people in the room that day. Western and Eastern cultures were represented in the room - after all, this was an event being sponsored by western organizations for an Asian audience in Singapore - and we were able to work through many complex decisions.

***Frank Daugherty: Which language to use?***

One of the interesting aspects of being bilingual to one degree or another is that you have to decide which language you are going to use when speaking to others in a neutral setting or when they are also bilingual. The general tendencies that I've noticed:

1. The person with the stronger second language skills uses his or her second language, especially when the other person or persons clearly feel more comfortable with the 2<sup>nd</sup> language. Sometimes there is a quick and mostly unconscious testing period to see who has the better second language skills.

2. Context is important. For example, I speak Japanese with most of my Japanese friends, but there are some who are very comfortable in English. In the US, we almost always use English. In Japan, surrounded by others speaking only Japanese, we would rarely speak English.

3. If a person begins talking to you in English, even though you know his or her native tongue, it is often better not to switch to their native tongue. It can be an insult, a judgment on their ability in English (for example). I have talked with some folks for quite a while in English before some external circumstance gives me a chance to use Japanese in a natural way. Often my conversation partners are very shocked to see a caucasian speaking good Japanese, but by that point, I have let them see that I accepted their English as adequate. In my early days of being quite proud of my ability in Japanese, I would use it anyway -- thereby not endearing myself to those who were trying very hard to use English. Communication is collaboration.

4. Code-switching - changing from one language back and forth to another - drives some people crazy. They see it as showing off, which it could be! But it is great fun among other bilinguals, if everyone is on board with it. Code-switching is a rich source of humor.

5. Bilinguals can be brokers - they connect different language-using CoPs. Sometimes it's conscious, but I suspect it's most often unconscious.

6. In my office, we now finally have two other bilinguals (Hispanic background, not Asian). The area in which I live has people from lots of different linguistic backgrounds (20+). When a person with a strong accent would call in, our poor monolingual secretaries and receptionists used to always pass the phone call along to me, because I could often figure out what the other person was saying, even though I'm only really familiar with three or four accents. Now that there are others who can do this as well, I don't get as many of these phone calls. And interestingly enough, the monolinguals are either trying harder or getting more used to the many accents. The office CoP has changed its practice gradually.

**Joitske Hulsebosch: The cancelled CoP meeting in Cotonou**

The Western African Community of practice on process facilitation planned a three-day meeting in Cotonou. Just before the meeting, it was cancelled by the country director of the host country, Benin, stating that it wasn't an appropriate time for us to meet and that he doubted the value produced by the CoP meeting that would cost 15 x 3 = 45 advisory days. Through clever negotiation, the CoP coordinator managed to get the meeting on. The experiences of the first meeting had led to the following precautions for this meeting:

- English/French as combined languages put the French speaking Africans at a disadvantage for participating (though officially they were required to understand English); so the main language was French.
- Input from headquarter specialists is interesting but dominates the agenda; so we did not invite external advisors to participate fulltime.
- Most countries had sent their expatriate staff to participate in the first meeting making it a very 'white' meeting; so we consciously got more African advisors on board making it a better multicultural mix.
- The first meeting drifted towards discussing organizational change issues instead of practice issues; so we prepared the meeting to have advisory practice at the core by having a lot of case presenters.

The meeting was really fun and productive at the same time. People were interested in each others' work, and everyone interacted with everyone. Despite the pressure to produce, the CoP meeting took place in a positive, encouraging spirit. All members present learned a lot and got an enormous amount of energy out of it.

<b>Theme: Communication protocols</b>			
<b>Story</b>	<b>Interpretative question</b>	<b>Alternative explanations</b>	<b>Possible tips &amp; techniques for facilitators</b>
Planning the conference	What made the meeting productive and inspiring?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Multicultural group - no dominance</li> <li>* Common goal</li> <li>* Speaking the same language - also professional language</li> <li>* Open attitude: listening and challenging attitudes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Develop an understanding of each other's professional language</li> <li>* Stress common goals and interests</li> <li>* Avoid idioms and check for understanding</li> <li>* Stimulate and reinforce open attitudes among participants</li> <li>* Stimulate enjoyable interactions when working together</li> </ul>
Which language to use?	What are the different layers in language?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Language has many layers -- different people may attach different meanings to words, accents, etc.</li> <li>* Bilinguals can</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Make sure people understand each other</li> <li>* Be aware of misunderstandings</li> </ul>

		play broker roles	
Cancelled CoP meeting in Cotonou	What contributed to the energy and productivity in the group?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Group feeling because of 'common enemy'</li> <li>* Focus on practice, and all participants have similar practices</li> <li>* Multicultural group rather than bicultural - no "us vs. them"</li> <li>* No real dominance in numbers</li> <li>* Language to accommodate ease of expression for all participants (+ flexibility)</li> <li>* Sensitivity to issues of dominance and non-dominance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Create multicultural groups rather than bicultural to avoid an 'us and them' situation</li> <li>* Try to ensure numbers of participants of dominant cultures are not high as compared to other cultures</li> <li>* Pay attention to language -- non-native speakers may be more competent in writing than reading so use support materials</li> <li>* Get people to interact and not just sit beside each other</li> </ul>

### 3. Learning about self

Being willing to learn creates a mindset that allows people to challenge their own assumptions and to gain greater insights into their own behaviors, beliefs and preferences. Such learning opportunities are particularly possible in intercultural interactions because people are often in situations that are new, uncomfortable or simply different from that to which they are accustomed. If the individual is open, this disequilibrium provides a chance for new knowledge, especially about oneself.

***Beverly Trayner: Cultural surprise in CPWeek***

I was sitting at the table with my group in a hotel with a lovely view in Santa Cruz, California. It was the second day and I confess to feeling slightly intimidated by how efficient everything was. Lots of activities (including tea and coffee breaks) were running smoothly with everyone in their place at the right time, and nothing starting more than five minutes late - not even breakfast. What's more, everyone had time to speak and time to listen...

Then someone at my table, impatient, said: "It's a bit too laid back here. They should tighten up. Nothing starts on time ...".

I hastily made a note of his name under the heading: "People not to invite to an event in Portugal"!

***Ancella Livers: Living in the world***

After my first year in college, I spent the summer in Guadalajara, Mexico. It was my first time being so far away from home, by myself. For the first two weeks, I spent time with other U.S. students in an intensive language program in a little village near Mexico City. After the two weeks, the program sponsors sent us to live with families and I was sent to Guadalajara.

I was alternately excited and terrified at the prospect. Why in the world had I signed up for this? I was, at best, proficient, in Spanish. (Suggesting proficiency is very generous.) I was shy around new people. I was thousands of miles away from home. And to make it all worse, I wasn't just meeting new people, I was moving into their home.

I remember quite vividly, being in my room in my "family's" house. I was dreadfully homesick when I heard the sound of children playing in the yard. I couldn't hear what the children were saying; I could only hear voices and they sounded just like children anywhere. It was then that I realized that children were children and the only way to learn about a place was to open yourself to it -- perhaps even to explore it with child like wonder.

At that moment, the terror receded and the excitement took over. It became one of the best experiences of my life and has left me imbued with the desire to gain a better understanding of other cultures in the world. Frankly, this helps me to gain a better understanding of myself.

***Bronwyn Stuckey: Role-play and anonymity***

I am relaying a story but my own experiences support this. A colleague devised a role-play as part of a postgraduate qualification in which students from two courses came together to discover where economics meets law.

They were exploring an issue on the news that involved key players in the Australian government, the legal system, media and financial institutions. These were larger than life characters on our who's who in Australia. None of the students or the teacher knew who had been assigned which roles until the debrief at the end. One of the findings of the research was that role play acted to free some people from cultural restraints and to explore the online environment in different ways than what they may have otherwise have tried.

The most bombastic character in the role-play, a media tycoon here, everyone was shocked to find was beautifully played by an Asian female student. She said that she would never have even asked a question online because it might be loss of face for the teacher if she as the student did not understand something. But in this role-play, by recognizing her own cultural restraints (and being able to shed them), she could step up and be a force to be reckoned with.

I think sometimes we each need to be allowed to step outside of who we really are, don't you?

<b>Theme: Learning about self</b>			
<b>Story</b>	<b>Interpretative question</b>	<b>Alternative explanations</b>	<b>Possible tips &amp; techniques for facilitators</b>
Cultural surprise at CP week	What made her realize her own biases?	* Hearing another person's different interpretation of the same situation	* Learn about yourself/own culture by hearing other people's perspectives
Living in the world	What helped this person to deal with the tension created by her cross-cultural encounter?	* Realization that children are the same everywhere (and so are people?) * Opening up to make it a learning experience * Willingness to gain a better understanding of other cultures and herself * Ability to push personal boundaries	* Emphasize commonalities/ common needs and feelings. * Emphasize that working cross-culturally is beneficial for the personal learning process and can lead to innovation and creativity * Help people to work through their own fears
Role play and anonymity	What helped the girl to understand her own cultural restrictions and experiment with different behaviours?  What helps people to experiment with different behaviours?	* Role play as a structured exercise made experimentation possible * Willingness to see role play as a place for learning and exploring	*Use role-play as a powerful intervention to work with people to become more aware of cultural and/or personal inhibitions they hold * Use role-play to help people experiment with different behaviours * See culture as dynamic and hence accept that there are no 'rules to learn and follow' * Find other ways to help people to experiment with other cultural behaviors * Create a safe environment so people are willing to experiment with other cultural behaviors

#### 4. Importance of emotions

From the stories we deduce that cross-cultural encounters can induce strong emotional reactions. Hence, acknowledging the importance of emotions in influencing behaviors, interpretations and responses to events is an important intercultural competency. This is because in intercultural situations, behavioral miscues occur easily, and create situations in which emotions may be readily felt. These feelings can often positively or negatively affect what people say or think, even if the emotions are not publicly acknowledged. Further, cultures also display emotions in different ways, making it even more confusing to interpret emotions accurately.

##### ***John Smith An improvised game at a family reunion***

My family is bilingual. My wife speaks a little Spanish and my middle brother's wife reads English well but can rarely be coaxed to speak. Most everybody else can switch pretty comfortably between one language and the other. The subtle rules for which language to use are a bit mysterious. Last summer at a family reunion around my mother's 90th birthday we were all sitting around the kitchen table and I proposed a game.

In the game you try to tell a story by taking turns. The first time around the circle, each person says one word, trying to fit in grammatically, in terms of plot development, etc. The second round, each person says two words, the third, three, and so forth till each person says five words at a time. Then you say four words, and it goes around till each person says one word and then it ends.

We played a round in English and that was lots of fun; so we decided to tilt it toward those who were more comfortable in Spanish. When it came to the round where each person was to speak five words, my wife couldn't really figure out what to say. My daughter, who is bilingual in part because of having spent a lot of time in Colombia and with Colombians, whispered something in her ear, and Nancy said her five words in Spanish, "Me X en la Ostia." It was as if lightning had struck in the middle of the circle - laughter ... with people standing up freaked out. Nancy had no idea what she'd said. Liza had picked up a statement that I'd heard as a kind of heavy curse in Puerto Rico but that according to Liza was used pretty casually in Colombia. My nephew had **just** married a very religious and somewhat sheltered girl from a small town in Puerto Rico who was completely shocked! With apologies all around and a little shaking and chagrin, we did finish the game.

Community support to extend your language proficiency is a great help, but it's not an infallible aid.

**Nancy White: Better late than never?**

A long, long time ago, I left my home at age 16 to go to Brazil for a year. The first evening my host brother took me into the dining room, and showed me a beautiful bowl of tropical fruits, the likes I had never seen in my suburban US life. He proceeded to teach me the name of each one and the plan was at dinner he would ask me to name the fruit and show the family my eagerness to learn Portuguese.

That night we gathered for dinner and I first met my very formal host father, his very laid back mother from the north -- my first experience of seeing a woman of her age, post face lift... this was 1975, mind you!-- my fussy host mother, and two younger host siblings.

At the appointed moment Neto pointed to each fruit and I recited the name... of every crude Brazilian swear word in the book.

Father -- stunned silence  
Mother -- tried to cover it up  
Siblings -- rolling on the floor  
Grandmother -- stands up, comes over to my side of the table and gives me a kiss

<b>Theme: Emotions at play</b>			
<b>Story</b>	<b>Interpretative question</b>	<b>Alternative explanations</b>	<b>Possible tips &amp; techniques for facilitators</b>
An improv game at a family reunion	What caused the wide range of strong emotional reactions?	* The same words may have different meanings in different sub-cultures or different countries	* Choose your humor carefully and be ready to apologize if needed
Better late than never	What caused the reactions?	* Individuals from the same country react differently -- personal styles differ * Understanding the background of what happens is important * Empathy varies as well	* Be patient, with yourself and with others

## 5. Cultural Brokers

Finding and using cultural brokers, people who are a part of the culture or community with which you are trying to connect, can ease relationships between groups. Brokers can help facilitate connections to key people in a community while also tutoring outsiders on the mores and rules of the new group. It is important to find brokers who are respected in the community they represent. It is also important to recognize that although cultural brokers can share insights about a group, their opinions may not represent those of the entire group.

**Joitske Hulsebosch: The servant's quarter**

This story is not about cross-cultural teams, but deals with cross-cultural communication. It is so funny that I would like to share it.

When I worked in Kenya, a Kenyan friend and colleague from the Provincial Irrigation Unit from a well-to-do family was invited for the international ploughing contest in the Netherlands. I happened to be on holiday in the Netherlands and was staying with my parents. So we invited my friend over to our house. My parents are a typical middle-income, Dutch family and live in an area with similar houses in a row. Behind these houses you will find the bicycle shed, where people put their bicycles and tools.

When my Kenyan friend saw the shed, she said: 'and this must be the servant's quarter, I assume?' My mother was perplexed as to why she thought we had servants!

**Nancy White: Online and under the coffee-break tree**

One of the first online events I did for a global research consortium was around an organizational change effort - lots of political issues and clearly some trepidation for those at lower levels, often the people from the host country, to speak their truth to authority.

One of the few women in senior staff and a Kenyan (rather than an expat) noticed that many women in her location were not posting anything online other than introductions.

So each day at afternoon coffee she would convene who ever was available beneath the big tree in the courtyard where many took their coffee-break. They would discuss the issues being considered in the online event, and then the manager would post a collective response!

She gave them voice.

<b>Theme: Cultural brokers</b>			
<b>Story</b>	<b>Interpretative question</b>	<b>Alternative explanations</b>	<b>Possible tips &amp; techniques for facilitators</b>
Servant's quarter	How might people's life experiences influence their interpretation of events?	* People interpret events and objects from their own mindset. * Stereotypes definitely are at work when working with unknown cultures * When you don't have to work or compete over resources, it is	* Use humour to oil the whole process * Make use of interpreters who have knowledge of multiple cultures * Stimulate willingness to make assumptions explicit and to talk about them by giving the

		easy to laugh about the differences.	example yourself - being a role model
Online and under the coffee break tree	Why were people able to hear the voice of the women?  Why didn't the women express their views online?	* A broker was able to see and remove the major obstacle * Willingness to invest more time in the process to link the women up to the internet	* Try and blend elements of different cultures * Make use of brokers, people who can understand different groups of people

## 6. Feedback

Asking for, providing and receiving feedback is an important yet potentially perilous intercultural competency. Asking for feedback allows one to gain insight and to moderate or change one's own behaviors based on new information. Providing feedback - when structured into a work situation as a norm -- can give people the chance to respectfully share their perceptions, thoughts, concerns or kudos with another person. When well done, such honest sharing can create strong bonds of trust. Receiving feedback gives individuals a chance to understand the perceptions they have created among people of different countries or cultures. While there are many benefits to feedback in its myriad forms, it can also be a risky undertaking in intercultural situations. This is because cultures vary widely in the ways, circumstances and topics about which it is appropriate to give feedback.

***Ancella Livers: Getting out of your own skin***

I was working on a research team. Our topic was literally global and though most of the team members were from the United States, we had worked quite hard to get input from people around the world. At this particular meeting, we had two non-U.S. team members in attendance. It felt very good. First, though, we needed to set up our meeting. We went through an exercise of norm setting and we discussed how we would discuss our discussion. This included how we might deal with conflict and how we would get input from team members. Once we had finished, we were ready to tackle the heavy content of the meeting.

It was around this time that one of the non-U.S. team members looked up and said "You all have no idea how American you are." I think as a group, our response was to both laugh and cry. We wanted to laugh because as we reviewed the previous hour, we could certainly understand what our team member had meant. We had been quite concerned about norms, etc. in a way that he was suggesting was peculiarly American. We wanted to cry, because we had been trying to be very conscious of our American behaviors and in spite of our efforts, we missed the mark anyway. It certainly helped me to understand the pervasive way culture influences everything we do, even when we're trying to not do it. Frankly, it's hard to get out of your own skin -- even for a little while.

***Meena Wilson: Working together or working alone?***

Professional colleagues - a German and an Indian - were collaborating to develop a theory-based questionnaire for a training program.

They worked together for several hours, writing up questions and checking to make sure they had items for the different parts of the theory. At a follow-up session, they reviewed their work and agreed that they were both very pleased.

The Indian colleague then assumed that the task had been completed to their mutual satisfaction, and was delighted. But the German colleague later returned to the task, re-worked several of the questions, deleted some of them, and added new ones.

I was the Indian professional. I could see that the re-worked questionnaire was an improvement. But I did not understand why my colleague had gone off and made the revisions on his own. After all, we had worked so well together earlier and done such a fine job!

<b>Theme: Feedback</b>			
<b>Story</b>	<b>Interpretative question</b>	<b>Alternative explanations</b>	<b>Possible tips &amp; techniques for facilitators</b>
Getting out of your own skin	What made people realize the cultural challenges at stake in this meeting?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Feedback by the two non-US members</li> <li>* Cultural habit of setting norms</li> <li>* Difficult to get out of cultural working habits</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Create safe and constructive feedback mechanisms</li> <li>* Develop reflective behaviors to develop acceptance of feedback</li> <li>* Position feedback as a gift people give each other</li> </ul>
Working together or working alone	<p>Why did the German consultant change the questionnaire single-handedly?</p> <p>Why did the Indian consultant not give feedback?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Both have different interpretations of 'joint work' and 'ownership of products'.</li> <li>* German may feel more in control/superior or the other way around;</li> <li>* Indian consultant may feel less in control</li> <li>* Germans may feel that an improved outcome needs no explanation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Importance of sharing expectations about what it means to work as a team</li> <li>* Let everyone know the rules</li> <li>* Address issues of power and domination and cultural inhibitions</li> <li>* Find ways to deal with issues of tension if those issues will impede future work</li> </ul>

## **7. Resolving conflicts and misunderstandings**

Some type of conflict or misunderstanding is likely to be part of any intercultural interaction. These conflicts or misunderstandings can range from insignificant to severe and can stem from multiple sources such as language confusion or misinterpretations of intent or almost anything. In addition, individuals from different countries or ethnicities may also bring deep-seated animosities into any given situation that can erupt within a seemingly neutral setting. Consequently, the ability to resolve, manage or work through conflicts and misunderstandings is necessary if intercultural relationships are going to have a chance to thrive.

**Joitske Hulsebosch: The team coordinator with an expert attitude**

When I worked as a member of a bicultural team (Dutch and Ghanaians) in Ghana, we were pioneering a new 'advisory practice' as well as the idea of 'self-managed teamwork'; even teamwork in general was new. The original team was relatively enthusiastic, open and successful, and flowered within the organization.

A new team coordinator arrived -- a Dutch man with experience in South America. He was responsible for evaluating the performance of the team members. He introduced some new ideas and put them up for team decision in the Monday morning meetings. He had a way of presenting his views in a conclusive, expert manner. The Ghanaian team members, though commenting to me privately on his ideas, hardly challenged his ideas in team meetings, making me lonely in my position of critical member.

This led to 'team decisions' that were not really taking into account the local circumstances. Decisions were resulting in disasters in daily work practice. For instance, a lot was invested in a workshop which never took off, client organizations were not responding to team efforts to build an advisory relationship, etc. Again, these disasters led to a vicious spiral of de-motivation of the team, low appreciation for the team by the organization, and some staff departing. When the organization did a general staff assessment, the team coordinator became disqualified as coordinator and continued his contract as ordinary team member.

<b>Theme: Resolving conflicts and misunderstandings</b>			
<b>Story</b>	<b>Interpretative question</b>	<b>Alternative explanations</b>	
Team coordinator with an expert attitude	<p>What led the team coordinator and the team to act as they did?</p> <p>What is the danger of generalizing experience from one culture to another?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Personality and culture (combined)</li> <li>* Lack of awareness of the impact of some behaviours</li> <li>* Lack of feedback mechanisms</li> <li>* The problem of experts who are not experts in a different cultural context</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Be careful with generalizations; generalizations are guidelines, but individuals are unique</li> <li>* Try to create appropriate feedback mechanisms and conflict resolution mechanisms -- design processes that help people to really hear one another's concerns and objectives.</li> <li>* Beware of the assumption that silence means consent</li> </ul>

## 8. Surfacing and owning assumptions

One of the main difficulties with intercultural interactions is that people react to new situations -- often emotionally -- based on their own assumptions about "how things *should* be." These assumptions are so deeply embedded in the individual's cultural understanding as to be unconscious and invisible to that individual. For intercultural proficiency, people have to be willing to surface, recognize and own their assumptions, so that they and others can see and talk about them. This may feel contrived and uncomfortable, but increases the group's ability to listen to and appreciate each other's perspectives and learn from that.

### ***Etienne Wenger: Misinterpretations at DaimlerChrysler***

When we were working with DaimlerChrysler, we notice a few things about meeting between Germans and Americans. When a German would come to a meeting, they would always have an agenda prepared in advance. Americans usually would not. This created some tensions. The Germans felt that the Americans were not prepared and were irresponsible. The Americans felt that the Germans were trying to control the agenda, as for them the agenda is something that should be negotiated at the beginning of the meeting so that everyone can contribute to it. It took a few meetings for these things to finally come to be addressed and understood.

### ***Nick Noakes: Meetings across cultures***

In the US, meetings are usually to discuss and make decisions. The process can often be quite adversarial and at the same time be democratic. However, among the Chinese, all the 'western meeting work' is done before the meeting. The chair/boss would have gone round talking with everyone, checking out their views and perhaps done some persuading/politicking. The chair, and often everyone else, pretty much goes into the meeting knowing what the outcome of the decision will be. This decision is reached and then everyone may go to lunch and celebrate!

This has happened to me in numerous meetings in my time in Hong Kong and is very commonplace.

**John Smith: Cultures collide in Silicon Valley**

I was one of the organizers of a small conference in Silicon Valley (with Nancy White, Estee Solomon Gray, and Teddy Zmrhall) that was trying to bring technologists and people working with communities of practice.

The first night after dinner we did an exercise called "social landscaping" where we would use a criterion of some sort to organize ourselves spacially in the room. Estee, who was facilitating, would say, "Everyone who's worked for a company that's gone bust, stand on this side." Some of the categories were just demographic and others were more focused on the subject of the conference. After a while the group started throwing out categories of various sorts, eventually leading to: "How many people have their own blog?" (It turned out that some people in the room didn't really know what a blog **was**, let alone have their own.) There were a few ever-more-exclusive blog-related questions, ending with: "How many people get **paid** to blog?" I think there were three people. As I recall that was toward or at the very end and it kind of left a strong sense of division.

The next day we did an exercise to map issues onto a wall. We were using hexagonal post-its. It turned out that there were a lot more connections (socially and conceptually) between the technologists in the group than there were between the "community folks." When we took some time to put the issue hexagons on a wall, the technologists managed to come up with a remarkable, synthetic, and terse arrangement for the issues they saw. The "community folks" were "all over the map" in terms of categories, let alone connections or differences between those categories; so their map was completely chaotic.

<b>Theme: Surfacing and owning assumptions</b>			
<b>Story</b>	<b>Interpretative question</b>	<b>Alternative explanations</b>	<b>Possible approaches/issues for facilitators</b>
Mis-interpretations at DaimlerChrysler	What created tension between the Americans and Germans?	* Differences in ways of working * Attributing different ways of working to being irresponsible	* Help surface assumptions that get in the way of the task/group process so that the group can deal with them. * Try and find those elements which break or make the learning experience and deal with those, rather than designing for every cultural preference (which is impossible)

Meetings across culture	How do cultures make decisions?  How can the differences be dealt with for constructive working relations?	* Adversarial decision making is only one of many effective decision making techniques * Conflict may be best handled in private settings * There are differences in ways of working which are invisible and intangible	* Give people decision making alternatives * Give people alternatives in dealing with conflict * Learn to pay attention to and understand invisible cultural codes
Cultures collide at Silicon Valley	What caused the differences in the two groups?	The two groups have developed strong subcultures with their own paradigms. This influences the way things are done (working chaotically versus schematic thinking)	Be aware of the fact that paradigms behind subcultures manifest themselves at all levels.

## 9. Respect and openness

Respect and openness for other cultures, people and practices is critical if one is going to have successful intercultural relationships. These characteristics create the conditions for multi-directional learning and acknowledge the status, power and knowledge of all. Embedded in the concept of respect and openness is a suspension of judgment about others' cultural behaviors and values.

### ***Bronwyn Stuckey: Maldivian greater good***

I was working teaching in a postgraduate program here in Aus with engineers from the Maldives, in an instructional design course. We got onto talking about assessment of digital products and how we would know whether the work is that of the student.

The guys told me a story of how one of them in the group had all his assignments done, at least to first draft, by others in the group. One group member commented that he had done several assignments for this person and that for him, writing for the other person became his first draft and his own paper was a better paper because of that. I asked them if they felt it devalued their qualification that in the end one of them would get the same degree without largely having done the work. The said resoundingly NO. They would prove themselves individually in their workplaces; but getting the whole group through the course and supporting each other was much more important to them than any individual rivalry.

These guys were studying away from their home for 18 months. Being devout Muslims they maintained this sense of the greater good. It very pleasantly confronted my academic, Presbyterian Anglo values, I can tell you. PS: They never did tell me which student it was and I could not tell.

**Susanne Nyrop: Immigrants meeting the local people, Denmark 1983**

In 1981, I moved with my children, age 8 and 9, to a new suburban area with a mixed population of Danish low-income people and immigrant workers with their large families; a majority came from Turkey and many were political refugees from the Kurdistan, or even from Chile. Many efforts were made to make people feel included in local community work, such as by cultivating small gardens among houses, a large playground with a club house for the after school hours, and many local hobby club apartments. But there was a typical distance between the native Danish people and the foreign population. The school in the center of this town had about 80 percent foreign students, while the rest of the Danish were sent to another school district, from the village nearby, where people were house owners and definitely Danish. This was not an official segregation, as it just made sense that the children with a foreign background be given extra lessons in their mother tongue. So, kids did not often play together across their culture of origin, and parents did not mingle either.

One day at the library, I met a boy, 10 year old, whose older sister was pushing him around in a wheelchair. Somehow we started to talk about the book he was reading. He was using a little type writer and I could see that he was a brilliant little thinker. We met now and then, and one day Sükrü invited me to visit his parents. Did I say he was from Turkey? I was very excited and nervous because I did not know anything about their house rules or religious taboos. But I did not want to let this charming child down and of course I went to see the family.

They had invited everybody! Sükrü was their youngest. A sister and a brother, both parents, and even the local imam was present. And what a party we had! Food, tea and cakes - and one beer for this Danish lady! Sükrü's mother was in the kitchen all the time - until she heard that some of the younger children had challenged me to sing together with them. Then she joined us and we sang "Brother John" in many versions. She was a woman about fifty years old who never said many words of Danish - it is not an easy language to learn. It was the first time in five years that they had invited a Danish visitor!

This family happened to become my closest friends in the neighborhood, always welcoming me in their home. I was also invited for Sükrü's birthdays and later his wedding.

Now both his parents are dead, and he considers me his auntie. And I'm sure that Sükrü, his nieces and nephews feel more comfortable with Danish community life than his parents did. Or was that MY countrymen that were unwilling to open up and invite our guest workers into their lives?

Today, in Denmark, a sad wave of a little racism has been nourished by a dirty right wing movement. I feel ashamed when I hear how just plain folks find any reason to speak badly about people they don't even care to get to know...

<b>Theme: Respect and openness</b>			
<b>Story</b>	<b>Interpretative question</b>	<b>Alternative explanations</b>	<b>Possible tips &amp; techniques for facilitators</b>
Immigrant meeting the local people: Denmark 1983.	How do cultures get to know each other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Dominant groups being willing to cross barriers</li> <li>* Being willing to meet people on their own turf</li> <li>Having fun with people can break barriers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Help people to experience other cultures by organising social interactions</li> </ul>
Maldivian greater good	What made this a real cross-cultural learning event?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Open attitude: learning and trying to understand the rationale behind some behaviours rather than judging the behaviour</li> <li>* Feeling safe to open up real issues</li> <li>* Differences between individual and collective mindsets</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Stimulate and reinforce open attitudes among participants by setting an example</li> <li>* Creating trust</li> <li>* Use the 'ladder of inference' to explain the working of assumptions</li> <li>* Ask questions to gain understanding</li> </ul>

## 10. Importance of trust

Trust is critical to creating and maintaining intercultural relationships. This is particularly true in light of the ever-present opportunities for conflict and misunderstanding. In conflict situations, trust may be the one thing that gives people the psychic space to work through their problems. However, trust, particularly at the beginning of a relationship, should not be assumed and is likely to have to be earned in ways significant to each individual's culture. Though trust may be difficult to earn, it is generally quite fragile and can be easily sundered by experiences that may seem insignificant to some and very significant to others.

***Stephane Acel: Cultures in conflict: A set back***

I was once working to support the Middle East peace process between Israelis and Palestinians. I arranged for a meeting between Jewish and Palestinian young adults in Toronto. I experienced a very lovely chat with my counterpart on the Palestinian end and a lot of enthusiasm. When push came to shove though, so few of his youth were interested in meeting our youth, that the event had to be cancelled. Because both peoples are in conflict "back home", setting up this meeting really required a lot more pre-work that I had put in. Setting this up from New York City by phone was simply not adequate enough to ensure success. I think there was too much at stake, for both sides really, for this to succeed with more investment of time and face-to-face contact. Trust was lacking.

***Ueli Scheuermeier: Participation***

Rural India, early nineties. The situation: A workshop in town with field workers of various agencies on "participatory technology development". Then we had to prepare ourselves for testing out our procedures in several remote villages. We met the forestry officers and explained to them what we had in mind. We knew there was a tricky conflict situation between the forestry people and the poor villagers because the villagers depended on forest resources (firewood, grazing) and that was illegal to extract. So what did "participation" mean?

Forest Officer: "No problem, don't worry. There will not be any problem with participation in the villages".

We: "Interesting! So how do you usually proceed?"

FO: "Well, if they don't participate, we will participate them."

Ooops----- hm, ahm...well, the forest guards are actually armed!!

We: "Okay, but we will be going into these villages, and if you folks come along, won't there be any problems for us to do our work there?"

FO: "No problem at all. We never have a problem with villagers"

We: "But when you take your guns along, isn't that going to cause villagers to feel concerned?"

FO: "That's right, those who have a problem with us, they always run away when we turn up. So you won't have any problems with your participatory approach, we can guarantee that...."

PHEW.... What is the meaning of participation anyway?

Theme: Importance of trust			
Story	Interpretative question	Alternative explanations	Possible approaches/issues for facilitators
Cultures in conflict: a set back	Why was the meeting not a success?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Bicultural meeting between groups in an inter-group conflict situation</li> <li>* Lack of trust to meet and dialogue</li> <li>* High stakes</li> <li>* Importance of larger context in which meeting is taking place and its affect on smaller group</li> <li>* Creating buy-in from more than a single individual</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Create trust, which may take much longer and take more time when groups have a conflict history</li> <li>* Recognize larger context</li> <li>* Build coalitions</li> </ul>
Participation	What caused the difficulties in communication?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Different understandings of the word participation</li> <li>* Different deeper 'mental models' at work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Make sure there is enough time to negotiate and discuss meanings of important concepts</li> </ul>

### Implications

To those who recognize themselves and remember their own experiences from reading this paper: Welcome to the community! Having committed to the adventure of cultural crossings, we are all on a learning journey - separately and together. We would like to hear your stories, so please feel free to send to us if you wish.

When it comes to making sense of the astounding variety of crossings that life in the global village brings us to, there is no such person as an "expert", just some with more experiences than others. We believe that each person must develop strategies and competence for themselves; each of us has to learn to anticipate what may occur in a cross-cultural situation and deal with what emerges. And there will often be a surprise waiting for us.

We have used stories to illustrate several issues that come up over and over again; and we have suggested approaches for working through what may be difficult or unproductive or sometimes hazardous situations. We think that the tactics that we have proposed are robust: Find your own and others' stories; ask yourselves and others interpretive questions; push to garner alternative explanations (that are cultural, personal, situational and random); and develop your own bag of tips and techniques - the best practices that you are able to put together by learning from the mistakes that you and others have made.

The manner in which each of us chooses to develop ourselves can show the way for others. We believe it is possible to be a role model, to set an example, and demonstrate rather than discuss how to work effectively in intercultural settings. The main point is to increase our individual capacity -- and the capacity of the groups to which we belong -- to deal with differences and manage potential conflicts by opening up communication and the possibility of trust and friendship.

These are a finite set of stories; but clearly, the numbers of such stories could be infinite. So also, the interpretive questions, alternative explanations and tips and techniques could be as varied as the individuals who participate in this kind of learning journey. Our invitation to you is to join the community, become a sojourner, and enjoy the journey!