



Exploring Cultural Symbols in Intercultural Dialogue

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Audience

University students, young professionals, or community groups interested in deepening their understanding of other cultures and enhancing intercultural dialogue skills.

Goal

To explore cultural values and beliefs through meaningful symbols, encouraging participants to practice perspective-taking and develop empathy in intercultural interactions.

Description

In this exercise, participants will share a meaningful cultural artifact or symbol and discuss its significance. The activity involves practice interpreting the meanings of artifacts, reflecting on their meanings, and learning about other cultures to develop intercultural understanding. Most importantly, they will come to realize that the meanings of objects and symbols vary significantly across cultures.

For example:

The color white is often associated with purity and weddings in Western cultures but represents mourning and death in many East Asian traditions.

The owl is a symbol of wisdom in Western cultures, while in some African and Indian communities, it is seen as a harbinger of death or bad luck.





Intercultural Dialogue Exercises

Structure

Part 1: Introduction and Ground Rules (5 minutes)

Participants begin by reviewing the purpose of cultural artifacts and establishing the ground rules for the activity:

Cultural artifacts or symbols are physical objects that represent values, traditions, or beliefs of a particular culture.

Ground Rules:

- Show respect and curiosity for others' cultural artifacts.
- Avoid making assumptions or passing judgment.
- Be open-minded and engage actively in the discussion.

Part 2: Guess the Meaning (50 - 60 minutes)

Step 1: Artifact Presentation (Teacher/Leader)

- The teacher or leader begins by presenting a cultural artifact or symbol as a model to start the exercise.
- They describe its appearance and origin but do not disclose its cultural meaning.
- Group members take turns guessing the significance of each artifact based on its appearance and context.
- The Teacher/Leader reveals the artifact's true cultural meaning and significance, sharing additional context or stories if relevant.

Step 2: Artifact Presentation (Participants)

- The participants take turns to presents their cultural artifact or symbol, describing its appearance and origin without revealing its meaning.
- The group members guess the artifact's significance, offering interpretations based on their perspectives.
- The presenter reveals the artifact's true cultural meaning, adding any personal or cultural stories to enrich the explanation.





Intercultural Dialogue Exercises

Once the process has been modeled by the group leader, each person in the room takes a turn presenting their own cultural artifact or symbol, then group members take turns guessing its significance, then the presenter reveals the true cultural meaning or significance.

Timing:

- Allocate 5-10 minutes per participant, including presentation, guessing, and revealing. For larger groups, divide participants into smaller subgroups to ensure everyone has sufficient time.

Part 3: Reflection and Action Plan (10 minutes)

Step 1: Personal Reflection

Reflect on the following questions:

- What did you learn about other cultures from this exercise?
- Were there any interpretations or guesses that surprised you?
- How did the actual meanings compare to the group's assumptions? What did this teach you about your own assumptions?

Step 2: Future Practice

Recognize the value of directly asking people about the meaning and significance of their cultural symbols and artifacts and strive to do so without giving offense. This fosters open dialogue, builds connections, and encourages deeper mutual understanding.

Time Required

Approximately 90 minutes. (The total time depends on group size. Smaller groups allow more time per participant, while larger groups may require shorter turns or subgroups).





Intercultural Dialogue Exercises

Hints for Success

- **Encourage Curiosity:** Participants should ask thoughtful questions about artifacts and their cultural contexts.
- **Foster Respect:** Remind everyone to treat all artifacts and interpretations with respect and care.
- **Celebrate Diversity:** Highlight the unique aspects of each culture represented in the artifacts.

Supplies Required

- Cultural artifacts or symbols brought by the teacher/ leader to start the exercise, as well as by all participants.
- Space for group discussion.

Resources

Cassels, T. G., Chan, S., & Chung, W. (2010). The role of culture in affective empathy: Cultural and bicultural differences. *Journal of Cognition and Culture*, 10(3-4), 309-326.

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Center for Intercultural Dialogue

Intercultural Dialogue Exercises

Source

Stellina Ogedengbe, Ifeoma Onyebuchi, and Favour Ilolo developed this exercise. Others are welcome to use and adapt it.

