

Meeting the Challenge of Cross Cultural Learning: Building a Learning Community

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This paper describes a 4 day conference where participants from the U.S. and Brazil sought to engage in cross cultural learning by building a learning community. The challenges of partnership, guiding values, session designs, and conclusions are discussed.

Nan-in, a Japanese master, received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen. Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. "It is overfull. No more can go in!"

"Like this cup," Nan-in said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?" (Reps, 1967)

Introduction

There have always been explorers, traders, and warriors who have crossed boundaries near and far and connected separated populations with words, ideas, and products. Yet the vast majority of humans have spent the vast majority of their time in interactions with others much like themselves. Nowadays, many business, educational, and non-governmental organizations span regions that have long been separated by distance, history, language, and basic premises about life. As the pace of the global economy increases, the sheer number of cross cultural contacts and exchanges progresses logarithmically. We can easily span the vast distances through flight and emerging telecommunication technologies, but how do we bridge cultures that have evolved through hundreds or even thousands of years of bounded interaction? Members of populations that have lived for centuries or millennia in relative isolation are now exposed to ideas, people, and media that challenge and upset taken for granted assumptions and values. As more and more people, products, and ideas cross national boundaries, how do we go beyond list of tips that help avoid the worst cultural blunders? How do we more deeply inquire into each other's realities? How important is the process of emptying and filling our cups?

Establishing the proper openness and pace of learning is critical. Yet, there are many who want their cups overfilled. More is always better. This points at one of the core dilemmas when relative strangers gather for a conference, workshop, or any type of cross group learning: given many urgent issues and limited time and resources, how can we fit in as much as possible, but also insure true learning?

This paper will examine a recent experiment with an international conference where the idea of building a learning community was a prime design consideration in cross cultural learning. We will begin with some ideas about culture, partnership, and community and then look at some key features of an “Cross Cultural Partnerships and Inter-Organizational Learning” conference held in Recife, Brasil.

Culture, Community, & Partnership

The metaphor of culture has become a powerful tool for change agents in grasping organizational complexities and in developing new insights. Seemingly disparate patterns of behavior are often linked by the underlying “collective mental programming” in a system. Through interactions and group memberships, we learn sets of norms, values and assumptions. A culture emerges and becomes a common base that allows individuals to anticipate and coordinate a wide range of behaviors. Many organizations have attempted to deepen this positive outcome by involving large numbers of their members in vision and mission statement work.

The strength of operating on a common wavelength is also a potential weakness as environmental conditions change. The cultural “auto pilot” may not perceive the need for change and it may block new information that doesn’t fit. When internal diversity is limited, the organization may not have sufficient requisite variety to cope with a complex, dynamic environment. An ongoing dilemma exists between clarity and focus and sufficient diversity to remain flexible and adaptive.

Recently, the idea of a “learning organization” has emerged in this context. It’s possible for a group or culture to have meta-norms, i.e. norms about understanding the norms of the system. This is the foundation for double loop learning (Argyris & Schon, 1978.) An organization with such meta-norms can go beyond direct coping in response to opportunities and problems, and in a self reflective way begin to learn about how it succeeds and fails as a system.

Senge (1990) argues that it is no longer possible to have a small handful at the top do all the learning for the organization. The ability to learn faster than your competitors may be the only sustainable competitive advantage. No organization starts great, it learns to produce extraordinary results. Many recent organizational innovations (TQM, self directed teams, etc.) seek to create more involvement and commitment and can be implemented in a way that boosts both single loop problem solving and double loop learning. In a similar vein, Block (1993) strongly encourages leaders to move their organizations from a compliance mindset to a partnership model of organizing. What is the best route in these moves? Maybe community.

As the cultural metaphor of organizations has gained prominence, it has provoked other insights. More recently, the metaphor of community is becoming more figural in grappling with organizational realities (Mehrtens 1993, Etzioni 1983.) A community view of organization evokes images that go far beyond our more typical short term, profit-loss, exchange theory relationships that still dominate many of our business organizations. We must ask what are the minimum and ideal conditions for people to thrive in organization with others. After one's home and family, the most important community we exist in is our work organizations. But what if this community is dysfunctional? What if it is purposely barren, non-caring? Can individuals and teams really perform at their best in such soil?

From a community perspective, issues of health, caring, quality relationships, involvement and commitment, long term survival and growth are central concerns that must be jointly optimized along with various technical and political issues that organizations face. If these authors are correct, a community perspective can be a key leverage in drawing out peak individual and team performance, not just an added niceness after everything else is decided. Cross functional Community Improvement Teams would send a strong symbolic message about that organization's priorities (Brown 1992.)

Even though there are more variables to pay attention to, the community nature of organizations may actually simplify the leadership challenge. Weisbord (1992) argues that a good community leads to order versus the "order leads to work" mindset in bureaucratic organizing. Work, order, and creative adaptation may more naturally flow from a learning community type of culture.

While community is an important route to stimulate internal diversity and bring out the best in organizational members, it is also highly useful to look beyond the organization's boundaries. We ultimately need to draw upon people and perspectives from outside our closed system and engage in a learning process with them. Other cultures can provide breakthrough insights for our own. They have organized differently and their sheer existence challenges (and provides legitimacy) for us to also perceive and behave differently. Can we begin to see and interact with outsiders as partners in our learning? Can we see possibilities for community between cultures and organization? If community is the route, what will building a cross cultural community require?

The answer may lie in the partnership experience and the attitudes and processes that generate it. Partnership is defined by a collaborative process whereby the parties "co-create" a new social reality (Clark and Matze, 1999; Yballe, 1991; Barlow, 1990) and experience joint ownership. This experience of ownership is not of parts of the whole, as if the created reality can be broken into pieces attributable to one party or the other. It is rather a more complex sense of ownership of the whole. There is, on one hand, a complete embracing of the created reality as issuing from one's generative act. And, on the other hand, there is an acceptance of the same ownership experience to the other parties that one claims for oneself (Yballe, 1991.)

As such, partnership describes a complex bond between individuals and one can assume a priori from experience as well as from research data (Hofstede 1980a) that partnering efforts in a

mixed culture context will run into extra difficulties. A comparison of Brazilian and American cultures reveals significant differences on all four dimensions (Hofstede 1980b.) What then are the requisites for successful partnering across cultural boundaries? What action generating principles will translate the desire to partner into co-creative action?

The Conference

In May, 1994, we explored these questions when a group of 10 Americans (headed by Don Wolfe and variously connected to the CWRU Department of Organizational Behavior) forged a partnership in building a temporary cross cultural learning community with a group of 30 Brazilians in Recife for a conference titled, "Cross Cultural Partnerships and Inter-Organizational Learning." The Brazilians were all members of a consulting school founded by Antonio Valenca who had previously worked with Don Wolfe at CWRU. A small group of the Brazilians had been to CWRU the year before for a conference on appreciative inquiry.

Traditionally, conferences, like most classrooms, have been designed with the "banking theory" of knowledge dominant (Freire 1970.) With business production efficiency, expert speakers verbally convey as much information and ideas as possible within a limited time and a very brief discussion follows. Efficiency is the foremost concern. These methods rest on 3 very unlikely assumptions, as most can verify from their own experience: 1) words are the most important carrier of meaning, 2) passively listening is as good as other means to acquire these words and their meaning, and 3) most people will have ready access, in important future situations, to this passively acquired, complex verbal information, organized according to someone else's needs. With good intentions, we become too busy and scheduled to struggle with uncertainty and open endedness and to deeply learn about each other.

The Recife conference extended over four days and incorporated many activities, but was guided in its design by certain values that sharply contrast with the banking theory of knowledge. We believe that people learn best when:

- activities engage people in what they truly **care about**, both deeply and in the moment,
- an appreciative focus is taken, rather than a problem focus,
- a **spirit of inquiry** is encouraged,
- we care about people's **safety** and inclusion and support their **curiosity** and risk taking,
- and the pace and type of learning is determined by the **ongoing needs** of the group.

In order to do these things:

- preliminary and ongoing data gathering and discussion about the needs of the group is central to the design process,
- a variety of people have input on design and also carry out the various tasks critical to success, e.g. coffee, introductions, etc.,
- rhythms of individual-small group-community, formal-informal, exploration-analysis, presentation-dialogue are balanced,
- the overall design and specific sessions are flexible enough to respond to the emerging needs of the group,

- and the process of coming together is always a legitimate area of inquiry and discussion.

The Conference

The conference began simply with a short introductory statement of the vision that would help guide us through the uncharted waters of the next several days. A translator was necessary for all large group sessions. Our goal was to join with and build a learning community at a deep level, both personal and groupwise. Not only would we learn about each other, but also about coming together as a learning community. Our immediate targets were to learn about ourselves and another culture and the formation of cross cultural partnerships. Our meta-target was an inquiry into us as we came together for this event. This “T-group” meta focus legitimizes the process data as equally valid material to spend time with. It provided a foundation for double loop learning.

Freire (1994) argued strongly that simple curiosity is the critical energizing component in the individual learning process. When new groups form, curiosity is heightened. The individual may wonder about chances for new adventure or about what the new group may require for acceptance. Our next step was to go with this inevitable situation and tap into our curiosities about each other. Small, “same culture” groups were formed to brainstorm and clarify curiosities with the intention of sharing these in the large group. Curiosities ranged from the suitability of room temperature, social habits, lifestyles, to work and organizational issues. The atmosphere was charged with anticipation and interest. As we heard reports, small groups would huddle in dialogue to understand what was being said. Several widespread eruptions of laughter and humor helped meld the large group as well as the expression of serious concerns about the next generation that we have in common.

The exercise also created a heightened awareness of the process of initial contacts. Will the other group express their needs? How are the roles of host and visitor affecting our community? Are we being warm and gracious enough? We were, of course, all leading with our best behavior, but could we get past being polite? Will inevitable mistakes become a source of learning? Can we overcome language and cultural differences and get beyond the “difference frame” in relating to each other? Ignorance cannot be hidden forever, it becomes obvious, so why not go with it? The excitement of curiosity, the hope of discovery, the desire to learn were still strong and helped the group to express these discomforts and uncertainty. Some risk taking would be necessary in behavior and speech as such questions and doubts can only be answered fully through interactions together over time and not settled on the spot with words.

Beyond the process awareness, both groups expressed many curiosities about the other group’s programs and its individuals. The Brazilians were particularly interested in Appreciative Inquiry. () Some had travelled to Cleveland the previous year for a workshop and the ideas had filtered through their larger group. Rather than have an expert teach everyone about it, we felt it was more important to establish the spirit of appreciative inquiry before explaining technique. We wanted to build common experience first. We wanted some activity to make each person more present in the larger community in a way that was meaningful to the individual and which provided the larger community with lots of data to begin exploring its curiosities.

The morning was divided into 2 segments. First, everyone was asked to quietly consider areas of passion or excitement in their current life and to draw a picture that illustrated that. This was essentially a brief appreciative inquiry into one's self and circumstance. Each individual reconnects with what they most care about and what really brings them to life and this becomes a background for connecting to others. Sharing so much info was an immediate logistical problem. Again, we were guided by the ideas of creating the spirit and building common experience first, rather than explanation. All 40 gathered in a circle and each person had the opportunity to walk their picture around the inside of the circle for all to see. Individuals not only had very different pictures, but varied greatly in this physical performance. Some walked, some danced; some made eye contact, others did not; some were fast, others were slow. The pictures were hung on the walls afterward and everyone had a chance to more closely view any of interest. The group felt good at this point and we felt good about our lives. All had "jumped in the water" and had been accepted. At the same time that we were managing inclusion, we were also glimpsing and beginning to appreciate the uniqueness of the other 39 and sensing the opportunity to meet many new and fascinating people.

After a break, we met in small groups of 6 to 8 to more thoroughly look into our pictures and their meaning. Fortunately, there were 9 or 10 Brazilians and one American who were bilingual enough to allow us to break into a number of small groups. The interpreters had to struggle and this proved to be of great benefit to all through the entire conference. In effect, there was an ongoing meta-inquiry into the nature of languages and the process of communicating. There was great desire to connect, but the usual assumption that everyone understands my words as I intended did not hold true. We were each more intensely faced with the questions of what do I really mean and what is the impact of what I say or do in this context. We had to choose our words more carefully and listen and question carefully to facilitate the group's progress. The freedom to be naive is a powerful force that needs support in the face of normal social pressure to appear knowledgeable and sophisticated. The common awareness of the language problem allowed more questions than are normally comfortable and so unintentionally facilitated the communication process. Again, a heightened awareness, but not easily discovered answers. An ongoing learning process was necessary.

These small group activities also broaden the foundation of personal relationships that are essential to a community. The total number of possible relationships increases logarithmically as the group size grows. We had now made contact with a handful of others around the issue of what is really important in our lives. With some intimate knowledge, it was possible to follow up at other points in the conference as one saw fit.

Curiosities about each other's programs was next on the agenda. Rather than a careful presentation of dry information, we asked those in each small group to reflect on what was exciting about their organization/program. The Americans and Brazilians within each small group essentially had the opportunity to appreciatively inquire into their own organizational experience and to clarify the best of that in order to present to the other group. Discussion and feedback from a different cultural frame helped individuals to further gain perspective on what is particularly exciting for them organizationally.

Ongoing reflection and redesign of the overall conference also took place each evening. Are we where we thought we would be? Where are we now as a result of the day's activities together? At the end of each day, some time was spent by a subgroup in reflecting on the course of events and making adjustments to the design for the next day.

The second day together was introduced by a short lecture on what constitutes a strong social system. John Anderson argued that strong social systems have both common ground and differences and that they can be analyzed along several dimensions: goals, values, resource interdependence, risk, and personal relationships. Our conscious attention had naturally been focused on what is different, but to truly proceed we would have to know something about what we had in common as well. We returned to small groups to flesh out John's model with specific data to illustrate the commonality and differences between the two groups/cultures present. While initially comforting to put the other into the neat box of "different," we did, in fact, have common ground around many values and goals related to change. "Kindred spirits" come in all sizes, shapes, and colors. Experiencing other individuals, one's group, and the other group as both similar and different at the same time is rather difficult work but truer to reality. Again, the group was left without a simple answer and faced with the need to investigate further.

A set of equally important informal activities were taking place along with the designed meetings. Each day began with a small dose of strong coffee and a hug from everyone. Both the mind and heart were fortified. We had meals at the conference site and this allowed various groups to follow up on issues raised or to pursue whole new areas of discussion. Evenings, however, were spent in communication through music, song, and dance, Brazilian style. Their ability to simply enjoy without self-consciousness created a space that made it easy for the Americans to enter. They patiently taught and we willingly learned their dances. Both groups sang as well, although the Brazilians had far more songs in common as a group and often spontaneously broke into song. By the second night, I fell to sleep feeling the music pulsing through me.

I had begun to discover that a different culture could bring out and support long unused (or underdeveloped) parts of the self. Ethnic roots resonated. The warmth, music, and closeness caused joy in the experience of it and true pain in its sharp contrast to the often cold, distancing, isolated nature of the American middle class and academic cultures. I needed a more integrated vision of work and play. I resolved to make some changes on my return home.

The next day was designed chiefly by the Brazilians. They demonstrated their usual clinic process and everyone took part in discussion. This was followed by a presentation of a extensive self study that the Brazilian consulting group was in the process of conducting. This was both a complex and risky double loop learning in practice. A document of themes and quotes, positive and negative had been just completed. Questions of how a group becomes a learning community, how it deals with positive and negative issues, and how to helpfully join with another group in its self study were focal.

The defining moment of the conference was to occur later on that last night together. After the song and dance had ended, there was still an incompleteness, a reluctance to call it quits. As we were leaving at 2:30 a.m., someone jumped into the outdoor pool (with clothes on.)

We were all again faced with an unexpected decision: to be once more or not to be. Some 25 people eventually found their way into the pool that evening for final song, play, comradeship, and baptism as a new inter-cultural learning community.

The energy from this experience carried over into the final morning. A presentation of the SIGMA (Social Innovations in Global Management Center) initiatives (including the global Ph.D. proposal) and the nature of Appreciative Inquiry started us off. Small groups followed with another “appreciative inquiry” of the week: what was the evidence of learning community as we experienced it, the key factors in successes, and how they can be carried forward. New small groups discussed and presented back to the larger group. We finished with final statements from all to the whole community.

Conclusion

For years, quality and cost seemed to be mutually exclusive goals to American managers. Yet, the Japanese discovered that taking the time and energy to improve quality actually lowered long term costs. A number of dilemmas were encountered during this three day intercultural learning conference: language and meaning, pace and duration of activities, amount of content versus process, level of intimacy and closeness, and finding a mutual understanding of worthwhile outcomes from the process. We found that the seeming dilemmas of coming together are best solved counter intuitively by taking the time to make contact, establish relationships, and inquire into the meaning of what emerges.

Such difficult relational questions cannot be analyzed and predicted ahead of time, a community must begin to form and manage itself. The quality of relationship, the richness of community becomes a key factor in the success of the cross cultural learning. Facilitating this process is then a prime consideration. In learning archery, Herrigel (1953) took years to discover that the true focus was inside, not on the target outside. The “zen experience” naturally leads to the proper orientation and result. Can taking time to care about individual experience and community feeling actually accelerate the learning process?

There were a number of factors that contributed to the building of a learning community at this conference. An inter-organizational/ inter-cultural learning community will prosper when:

1. There is immersion in a home community with strong learning norms. Both the Brazilian and the American groups were deeply committed to ongoing development and learning as individuals and as groups.
2. Partners are of equal strength and share in the ownership of the process.
3. There is a realization that the wisdom to operate the system is widely distributed. This insight was recognized long ago in the I Ching of ancient China. Like water stored in the ground, the strength of a community is stored in its people, invisible until needed. When needed, all become the army.

4. There is ample preparation, investment, and anticipation by all partners to the event. Preparation and investment lead to greater involvement and understanding, and also communicates commitment to others, which tends to have a positive, self amplifying effect.
5. The agenda is broad enough for a community, i.e. makes room for diverse interests to be heard and expressed. The activities provide multiple opportunities for a wide range of acceptable/ desirable contacts.
6. Inquiry into the process is legitimate. The group has a mechanism to adjust itself in real time to better meet its individual and collective needs.
7. There is a tolerance for ambiguity. Premature closure and simplicity are disruptive to richer understandings.
8. An appreciative focus prevails. Finding and building on the best in ourselves and others expands hope, strengthens relationships, and guides future interaction.
9. Participants have room to wonder and wander. A spirit of inquiry and risk taking prevail at a range of levels from taking simple initiatives to immersing in the other culture/worldview thus allowing new expressions of self not generally supported and brought out in the home culture.
10. Participants discover that there is also a *common ground* of interests, values, goals, and action between their cultures and between particular individuals.
11. There is a willingness to sacrifice for the good of the community. There are many prices to pay: travel costs, time, tolerating the discomfort of uncertainty, giving others the benefit of the doubt, etc.
12. An open ended future is possible. Interdependency and relationships grow over time and can lead to completely unexpected paths. There was some previous history to the Recife conference that provided some basis for trust. There were also many possible ways to follow up with each other around this topic of partnership and intercultural learning.

Increasing global complexity presents a challenge and opportunity for all of us. Creative response relies on a rich and diverse set of sources. Organizations need to build learning communities within and also seek out partners beyond their boundaries to gain fresh perspectives and insights. The business of learning about another's culture is not a one step process though. We may arrive at new insights that greatly improve our understanding, but the other culture is not just these insights either. While rules of thumb are useful, the complexity of culture demands continual inquiry. Two people or groups must come together to establish and reestablish a common understanding for joint action. The learning community focus both encourages and contains richer experiences. The greater involvement and increased interdependence within a learning community leads to greater demands on the individual, but greater contributions often lead to greater rewards and satisfaction. Sufficient difference magnifies alertness and also

energizes the search for common ground. Both exist and drive the spirit of inquiry under the proper conditions. Taking the time and energy to establish and maintain a learning community proved a valuable strategy. When learning is concerned, sometimes we can go faster and further by going slower.

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