



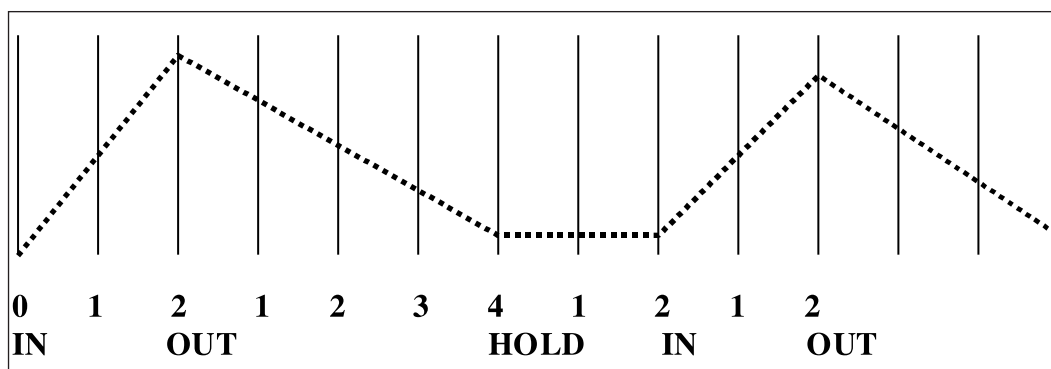
Exercise: breathing and relaxation

Stress has a big influence on our breathing; when stressed our breathing becomes irregular, flat, limited to a small region of the upper part of the chest, and we do not breathe out properly. The result is pretty obvious: the largest part of the body is under permanent tension. The following exercise (which is very easy to learn and can be done everywhere, except perhaps under water) focuses on this symptom. The basic principle is that breathing out slows down our heartbeat while breathing in accelerates it.

2-4-2 breathing

1. Breath in for 2 seconds, into the lower stomach (belly). Use your nose without broadening your chest, concentrate on the sensation of the incoming air.
2. Breath out for 4 seconds, after exhaling continue by using your stomach muscles to press more air out of your lungs.
3. Stay without breathing for two more seconds
4. Repeat steps 1-3 (1 entire breathing cycle at least 6 times: also watch the relaxation of tongue, teeth and chin)

TE-2



1.3 Intercultural Learning and Training

The field of intercultural learning in youth training is addressed by an entire T-Kit (No.4) in this series. However, in some ways, this is also a T-Kit entirely concerned with the subject. In other words, this whole publication is informed by a philosophy of interculturalism, and the various factors in training are approached from this fundamental premise. It is the authors' view that intercultural learning is not just something you do in a workshop, or on a rainy Tuesday afternoon (although it is clearly important and beneficial to deal with it as a subject in specific program components). It is a political philosophy that motivates international youth work, it is a body of educational practice that should arguably be everpresent, and crucially, it is a body of knowledge that demands reflexivity and the development of key skills by the trainer. As outlined in the introduction, this is something to bear in mind while reading very different sections, and intercultural learning is also explicitly addressed in other parts of this publication. The aim of this section is a bit like the blurb on the back of a best-selling novel; giving the basic



idea (if there is one), and stimulating the reader to look for these things inside the covers. Learning is considered elsewhere in this resource (4.2.1 – 3), but considering intercultural learning means at some point grappling with that most disputed of terms, culture.

1.3.1 Culture

To put it bluntly, culture is a complex and disputed term. Clifford Geertz, in his celebrated work *The Interpretation of Cultures*, notes that many works which seek to 'explain' culture tend to create more ambiguities in their pursuit of certainties. This is a realisation echoed by Jacques Demorgon and Markus Molz, who argue that attempts to define culture cannot escape the fact that it is itself culturally produced. This is an obvious, yet fundamental premise; as the English writer Raymond Williams illustrates in *Keywords*, culture is a concept with a history, and therefore cannot be approached as a scientific state of being, but instead, as a socially constructed way of conceptualising the way we live.

Approaching culture in this way has destabilised two deeply held notions of the term. Culture has often had a evaluative meaning, relating to the artistic production of a society, or more particularly, a nation. This definition has been subject to much criticism, focusing on the elitism involved and the social power to define which it represents. Another widely held concept was the anthropological notion of culture as a way of life, open to description and analysis by the trained, and normally western cultural scientist. Similarly, this has been weakened by the 'turning back' of cultural analysis on these practices, and by again emphasising the power to describe which was present in these intercultural encounters.

Contemporary definitions of culture (*for a fuller discussion of relevant theories, see the Intercultural Learning T-Kit pp 14-19*) tend to concentrate on analysing culture as the software which allows the human hardware to function, while disputing the levels of influence which the software package actually has. The software is loaded by a process of enculturation; we absorb values, customs, normative standards, notions of commonsense, and our ability to read the symbolic environment from influential factors in that environment. In other words, we learn how to interpret and communicate about reality from the reality that we are exposed to and shaped by. Learning through enculturation is a highly naturalised process, often compared to breathing; arbitrary and relative meanings, associations and differences become normal software for us to use in our daily lives.

It is misleading, however, to speak of culture as a kind of closed system, and of enculturation as a straightforward, common process. As a cultural being, you could ask yourself if it is possible to give your culture a label. To do this assumes that all of the processes that influence us are in harmony, and undisputed by us as experiential beings. It is common to hear culture being exclusively linked with national cultures, but even in isolated and apparently homogenous nations, there are many factors of difference and diversity which are important influences. In an increasingly globalised world, such national contexts are more and more difficult to imagine or sustain. Unprecedented human movement (from the privileged mobility of tourism to the misery of forced migration), global communication systems, increased economic linkages and larger international and global systems make it, to put it bluntly, more difficult for us to ignore each other. The repertoire of cultural influences that people are exposed to is constantly increasing, and some writers argue that the world is experiencing the development of *third cultures* through processes of *hybridity*. That is, the constant flow and meeting of peoples, objects, ideas and images are creating cultures that extend beyond the traditional markers of nation, family, ethnicity, religion, and so forth.

In many ways, international youth seminars can be seen in this light. Participants are encultured in different forms, yet it must also be emphasised that they may have many things in common; frames of reference, values, types of educational capital, youth subcultural lifestyles, organisational cultures, political commitments, and the list could be extended much further.



Therefore, while cultures exist, it is arguable whether we can equate people, or ourselves, solely with one culture, and that is presuming that we were able to describe that culture and set limits that differentiate it. The concept of identity allows us to approach these cultural contradictions in relation to our own experiences. Imagine that you are a Russian doll, with endless possibilities to produce another doll from inside the last one. How many would you need to represent the factors that are important to you in your identity? Reflecting on identity becomes a very important component in intercultural learning, as we shall see later on. At this point, it is worth thinking about these theoretical arguments in relation to a training situation.

1.3.2 Culture, Identity and Training.

A difficult question for any trainer to confront is, when is a situation cultural? Say, hypothetically, that *Miguel* constantly arrives late for plenary; how does the interculturally sensitive trainer react? Does she smile tolerantly at her reading of Miguel's southern time management, or read the riot act to the lazy boy and demand the same respect and commitment as that shown by a bunch of punctual northern Europeans with big watches? The example is clearly clichéd and stereotyped, but it illustrates a number of points; that we are required to interpret and evaluate information in this context, that we do so in relation to knowledge, experience and cultural information, and that we must negotiate the interaction between cultural beings and the evolving culture of the group itself (Question for discussion: does a training group have a culture, and if so, what notion of culture is being employed?). There is the possibility that Miguel is consciously manipulating the stereotypes which he knows exist, thus introducing the point that people also play roles and articulate their cultures differently, depending on the context they find themselves in. Relatedly, it is argued that people often step into the cultural roles expected of them as a way of dealing with the ambiguities of a multicultural environment.

These processes begin from the one predictable moment in a training – people meeting.

- Reflect on a recent international activity you took part in. When you met others, how did you represent your identity and way of living cultures? Did you think about the clothes you wore, the jokes you told, the type and speed of the information you offered about yourself? Did this differ from person to person? Can you trace the development of your roles within the group? Which of your *Russian Dolls* were public, and at what stage in the seminar?

While we may attempt to control the way we are interpreted by the way we represent our identity, reflecting on the way that we interpret others may indicate how successful this is likely to be.

- Earlier in this section, we used the metaphor of culture as software. Think of some people that you know well from youth work. When you first met, was it possible to 'read' them from very limited contact and information? What stereotypes and categories of interpretation did your software provide? Have any of these interpretations remained the same? Could you read their reading of you, and if so, did you attempt to adapt or reinforce these?

These processes of identity negotiation are central to understanding cultural group dynamics. People with complex socio-cultural biographies simultaneously project and interpret each other – we attempt to identify ourselves and others. We are not used to operating in a vacuum, which is why we can provide learned structures of reading from minimal information. The French sociologist Roland Barthes argued that signs in society have a denotative and connotative level. So, when we see a chair, it not only denotes the everyday object chair, but it also connotes (suggests) every chair we have ever seen, known, dreamed of, sat on, hated. In the same way, complex signs called participants can be immediately interpreted, despite us having little or no personal information about them. Stereotyping is a way of navigating complexity, the problems come when no new or challenging information is inputted into our software.

What this also emphasises is that we are constantly communicating cultural information, and that highly influential communication takes place outside of spoken languages. Yet when people are speaking the same language, similar cultural processes are taking place. Language



also works in terms of denotation and connotation, so while a group may share a vocabulary, that vocabulary may have subtle cultural and personal connotations that are very difficult to pinpoint. When people discuss justice, it is not just that they may have differing concepts of justice per se, but also that the way in which they have learned to use the concept justice may differ from one linguistic community to another.

Interpretation always involves some form of evaluation as well. A good example is the way we may interpret people's fashion style. It not only allows us to 'download' information, but information which evaluates them in various ways, for example, a shaved head. The connotations which we carry are not just neutral associations, but also related to our values about the world around us. Our cultural downloads contain prejudices; that is, the possibility to make judgments on limited information. Consider this again in a seminar situation: what types of people are you drawn to initially, and why? Who do you never seek out?

So far, this section has looked at the factors which can broadly be considered cultural when a group comes together. We must also remember that these cultural response patterns are not pre-determined, but highly influenced by the group itself. Stuart Hall has referred to groups as 'discursive formations', meaning that the different aspects of people's identities – the Russian Dolls – articulate in different relations to each other, depending on the context, group life, moment in process, and so on. Important elements in our culture and identity are not in some fixed order, but may shift in importance depending on the way we interpret the situation, and feel our interpretations will be received and valued. Think, for example, of different discussions on the same topic you may have had in different trainings. How have your contributions, ideas or positions varied? What do you think contributed to this?

1.3.3 Intercultural Learning?

In a general sense, intercultural learning may be viewed as a philosophical and educational response to the complexities of cultural situations. A point to bear in mind in relation to the processes discussed above is that our culture, how ever we conceive it, legitimates our interpretations and evaluations of social reality as normal and natural. People do not live in suspended animation; everyday we interpret and process enormous amounts of cultural information, and can only do this by deeply relying on our interpretative frameworks. It is within these certainties that *difference* and *others* may become evaluated negatively, and even seen as a threat. We do not have to search far in the societies around us to see these processes at work.

Intercultural learning operates from the viewpoint that, as Georg Lichtenberg put it, "It would be strange if the true system of philosophy and the true system of the cosmos both came out of Prussia". The education we are involved in, and the larger societies that we live, constantly bring into contact various deeply held notions of the true system of the cosmos. Intercultural learning attempts to challenge the centrality of our naturalised values and interpretations with the possibility to learn other values consciously. For some, intercultural learning is about management; allowing people to navigate their way through tricky foreign assignments, or business encounters. There is a useful body of literature developed in this field (*see, for example, Guirdham, 1999*). In the youth field, intercultural learning is often approached as part of a political project of building sustainable, participative intercultural societies, and as an educational discourse which allows us to benefit from the processes that take place within international trainings. (Question: how much of this analysis do you feel is relevant to national trainings you have taken part in?)

In further sections (4.2.5) we will be looking at ways of reflecting on ourselves as intercultural trainers, the approaches it may be necessary to develop, and discussing intercultural methodology. The table below lists some factors for the intercultural trainer to consider, and links them to more general training skills. It may prove useful for both personal reflection and thinking through the content of your training programmes.



Intercultural training competences and skills

<p>Knowledge</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness of intercultural processes and phenomena • Intercultural learning: understanding the possible stages of intercultural development, familiarity with key concepts and competences. • Intercultural training: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Design issues: session, day and program design – Learner issues: learning in an often ambiguous situation and relation of this to the learner's cultural identity. – Trainer issues: reflexivity in relation to own cultural identity, one's own strengths, weaknesses, preferences, blind spots. – Content: knowledge of central theoretical aspects of intercultural learning and communication, ability to evaluate applicability in training situations. – Educational approach: adapted to the learners's cultural backgrounds, learning styles and training objectives; knowledge of relevant training methodologies and their appropriate sequencing. • Diversity training issues: dealing with questions of power, racism, oppression and socio-economic inequalities to promote positive intergroup relations.
<p>Training Process Skills</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisational and learner needs assessment: the motivations of the organisation and of the participants, their learning styles, needs according the group constitution (cultural background, gender, etc.) • Training design: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Aims and objectives (according to the needs assessment) – Content: related to aims, needs and group constitution. – Program design and methodology: selection and sequencing of the methods according the participants' learning styles and needs. • Program implementation: delivering the programme, awareness of trainer roles and group dynamics, adequate debriefing. • Program evaluation: during and after implementation.
<p>Personal skills</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cognitive and behavioral flexibility: ability to adapt to new ways of thinking, behaving and interacting. • Cultural identity: having a developed sense of one's own cultural identity (and related values, attitudes, beliefs, style of communication and patterns of behaviour) • Tolerance of ambiguity: being able to work with unforeseen situations and contested meanings in training and with participants • Patience • Enthusiasm and commitment • Interpersonal and communication skills (including teamwork) • Openess to new experiences and people • Empathy • Respect • Sense of humor (and an awareness of the complexities of humour in intercultural situations!)
<p>Technical skills</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theoretical and practical knowledge about presentation, visualisation and documentation • Use of visualisation aids (overhead, flippchart,...)

(Adapted from Landis and Bhagat, 1996)



Suggestions for reflection

1. Could you add a skill/competency which you think is important and is missing from this list?
2. How do you approach your own intercultural learning process?
3. The table above lists several personal competences. Is this fair, do you think? Is it possible to train for these qualities?
4. How important is continuous training of trainers for your youth organisation? Who decides about the topics? How are trainees chosen? How is intercultural learning dealt with?