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Culture, Cognition and Learning Preferences

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Editors' Note: Kovach provides a fast tour of a number of aspects of culture, on the way to her central thesis – that particular cultures implicate particular styles of learning. Up to now, the teaching of negotiation has generally been insensitive to this. Kovach argues that to be truly effective, courses have to be largely rebuilt from the ground up for each different culture.

Introduction and Overview

Most people today find it easy to recognize the impact of culture[1] on many everyday activities, including eating, working, leisure time and even talking. Cultural references are often direct parts of conversation, such as Italian food, Mexican music or Irish dance. It is practically second nature to examine the different ways that we interact with one another — and to find a cultural basis or foundation to explain differences, such as characterizing running late as "being on Latino time" or the like.[2] Especially in our contemporary, multicultural world, it is even more common to integrate such references, often without thought or conscious acknowledgement. All facets of culture undoubtedly permeate almost every aspect of life.

This essay examines one specific, yet for the most part unrecognized, critical impact of culture: its influence upon one's ability and preferences for learning. While ample research materials exist regarding culture and negotiation, culture and communication, and even culture and dispute resolution, it has been challenging to find much in the way of research concentrating on the direct impact of culture on learning generally, let alone the learning of negotiation or mediation. Yet as negotiation training expands in the international

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arena, teachers at every level will encounter a variety of culturally influenced learning styles. Recognizing and understanding preferences and approaches in learning, and specifically their cultural basis, can provide a foundation for improving the design of, and instruction in, negotiation courses.

The "Rome symposium" provided an opportunity to explore a variety of issues related to the teaching and training of negotiation. Specifically, the movement toward a "second generation" training model necessitates a reassessment of both the content and conveyance of the training. The Rome program addressed cultural differences and their impact in negotiation in general terms, raising awareness of the need to include the subject matter in standard trainings. In teaching mediation and negotiation, instructors are often specific in their consideration of culture; for example, they might illuminate differences in concepts of time (monochronic versus polychronic) or norms for resolution. While most certainly an important element for inclusion in the *content* of negotiation training, especially when conducted internationally, culture must also be considered as a necessary component of instructional *design*.

My initial interest in this particular aspect of negotiation teaching stems from work over four years ago as an instructor for a group of law students from a wide variety of nations and cultures.[3] The course design, like most, was modeled on U.S. negotiation and mediation trainings, and I noticed that the students reacted differently to the various tasks and teaching methods. During additional opportunities to teach and train in the international context, I continued to find, for the most part, that the programs repeatedly used that same U.S. dispute resolution model of instruction. Most classes consisted of a mixture of lecture, discussion, and simulations that were exported, I suspect, without an in-depth or detailed consideration of how individuals in different venues learn. Indeed, others have had similar experiences, resulting in an "on the ground" modification of the training (Abramson, *Outward Bound to Other Cultures*, in this volume). What has been essentially absent is any real consideration of the differences in learning styles and abilities which, at least in part, are derivative of one's culture.

Recent empirical data clearly support the notion that one's culture directly impacts learning preferences (Auyeung and Sands 1996; De Vita 2001; Barron and Arcodia 2002; Charlesworth 2008). Teaching methods in the next level of negotiation training must be designed to adapt to those different learning styles. Trainers should possess an understanding of how individuals' prior education and experience in their cultures impacts preferences for learning. In essence, my purpose is to consider explicitly the *how* rather than the

what in teaching negotiation. An improved understanding of "how" will provide those designated as learners – the trainees – a better and more familiar method actually to learn the knowledge they seek.

A Historical Perspective of the Evolution of Negotiation Education

While many trainers in the ADR field are aware of the need for a variety of teaching approaches, recognizing that necessity may stem from their personal experiences with the field. For example, many early mediation training programs included a number of exercises and simulations. As training programs evolved, they became increasingly interactive in design. Teaching manuals which accompany dispute resolution text books commonly contain numerous problems for interactive teaching methods. Others, in discussing teaching approaches in these courses, rely on Knowles adult learning theory as the foundation for experiential methodologies (Nelken, McAdoo, and Manwaring, *Negotiating Learning Environments*, in this volume).

There are other explanations, of course: an understanding of adult learning theory may have informed some instructors, or perhaps the nature of the subject matter itself, centered on interaction, communication and empowerment, led to teaching methodologies incorporating such principles. Similarly, legislators and judicial officers codifying ADR training requirements typically favor an interactive teaching approach, relying on the recommendations of trainers who designed the models based upon their experiences. For example, in Texas the standards for mediation training established by the Texas Mediation Trainers Roundtable[4] included an explicit acknowledgment and inclusion of a variety of teaching methods. Varied teaching approaches have also been incorporated into state statutes and statewide approval mechanisms which address mediation training.[5] This codification of interactive learning is most likely based on past experiences rather than an examination of learning needs, preferences and approaches.

In current negotiation instruction, the subjects of diversity and culture nearly always appear with regard to the impact of culture on the negotiation itself, not the learning of the process. For example, experts examine numerous cognitive impacts of negotiation behavior, as well as nuances in communication, highlighting cultural tendencies and differences (Gelfand and Brett 2004). Absent is the recognition that these elements impact the learning of negotiation.

Other authors in this volume have written sharp critiques outlining how the distinctly Western worldview of negotiation dominates existing training models, crowding out the necessity for

understanding differences in cultural values and social norms, which is increasingly critical to negotiation success (LeBaron and Patera, *Reflective Practice*; Fox, *Negotiation as a Post-Modern Process*; Abramson, *Outward Bound to Other Cultures*, in this volume).

Similarly, I join colleagues Nadja Alexander and Michelle Le-Baron in bemoaning the virtually lockstep over-reliance on role plays and exercises, many developed in the U.S. and exported without much thought (Alexander and LeBaron, *Death of Role Play*, in this volume). While many are excellent teaching tools and can be used in numerous settings, trainers should no longer rely nearly exclusively on such past exports. Experiential learning is based upon the premise that the experiences must be realistic to have meaning for the individual students (Ferber 2005). In other words, the exercises and simulations should contain subject matter likely to be encountered by the students, or at the very least have a minimal connection to familiar matters. In this way, simulations can raise particularly relevant and meaningful issues. Absent that connection, the impact and learning from such exercises may diminish. For example, a simulation of a pending legal claim over medical negligence is quite realistic in most U.S. jurisdictions, but has little direct relevance for those in New Zealand, where such claims are subject to a governmental compensation program. On the other hand, a commercial dispute over the sale of goods is fairly common worldwide. Although we can never replicate reality, by taking the time and effort to design culturally and experientially relevant simulations, we increase learning opportunities.

Others, too, have recognized that typical U.S. pedagogy may be unfamiliar, even unwelcome in other countries (Abramson, *Outward Bound to Other Cultures*, in this volume; Gold, *Negotiating Cultural Baggage*, in this volume). While many aspects of current training methods are quite successful, the mission to examine and design the second generation of training must include more deliberation of learning abilities and preferences, beginning with an awareness and recognition that learning differences exist and are culturally based.

Importance of a Focus on Learning Styles and Preferences

Teaching is defined in a wide variety of ways. While many definitions revolve around the actions of the teachers, another view places the focus more, or at least as much, on the learner. Viewing a teacher's role as that of a facilitator of learning emphasizes creating opportunities for students to learn. Though in such a situation the actions of the teacher and the student must be considered in tandem, most scholars have focused on the material and how to present

it, rather than the different ways in which it may be received. Turning attention to reception and processing of both information and skill sets will increase learning effectiveness.

Learning, information processing and communication styles are intricately related. An individual's culture influences elements of each of these processes (Guild 2001). Over time, particularly as one remains in a given culture, preferences for types of communication, information processing, and learning styles develop. Most people, however, can and do accommodate the medium of message or instruction in educational settings.

An examination of learning preferences necessarily includes consideration and acknowledgement of the existence not only of differences in learning, but also variation in intelligences (Gardner 1983). And, while we know that much of intelligence is derivative of heredity, it is also acknowledged that components are grounded in culture as well (Reiff 1997). Although not technically considered part of the inventory of learning styles, the recognition of alternative abilities, often recognized as intelligences, underscores various ways of learning (De Vita 2001).

A number of different ways or categories exist for examining learning preferences or styles.[6] At a relatively basic level, learning involves the receipt of information. This has been divided into three primary categories: visual, auditory and kinesthetic (Sprenger 2003). The categories are fairly self-explanatory. Visual learners prefer written material, diagrams or charts. Auditory learners favor spoken communication, such as the use of stories and examples. Kinesthetic learners need to engage in an activity or a hands-on approach to enhance learning. Certainly one's culture, particularly one's past experience in processing information through these primary means, will have an impact on the preferred approach.

Models of learning styles are more intricate, consisting of layers or levels of information processing. David Kolb's commonly discussed model, based on experiential learning, includes four categories of learning which have been incorporated into a learning style inventory or questionnaire: activist; reflector; theorist; and pragmatist (De Vita 2001). An activist learner prefers activities and direct engagement with the material. Reflectors need time to consider and ruminate about the lessons or discussions. Theorists tend to gather information and organize it into a comprehensive theory or model. The pragmatist favors the practical application of material. Another detailed example suggests that learners or students have particular preferences for how they perceive and process information and instruction. The four distinct categories are active-reflective, sensing-intuitive, visual-verbal, and sequential-global (Felder and Brent

2005). While the activist gains most from a hands-on experience, a reflector needs time to think and to reflect. Likewise, a sensing learner is focused more on concrete examples, practical applications and memorization, whereas the intuitive learner prefers more abstract and theoretical considerations. Visual and verbal is similar to the earlier example with the visual learner preferring pictures and diagrams whereas the verbal learner prefers written and spoken explanations; a sequential learner needs more of a step-by-step approach to the material, whereas the global learner prefers to see or hear "the big picture" (Felder and Brent 2005).

Experts have also identified distinct preferences for learning by considering the process on two levels: 1) how information is received; and 2) how it is processed (Felder and Brent 2005). Specifically, students are viewed as having a preference for either a concrete experience, or for more abstract concepts in terms of gaining information. With regard to information processing, some prefer active experimentation, while others work better with reflective observation (Felder and Brent 2005, citing Kolb's theory).

These learning abilities and likely their reinforcement have taken place in the context of a culture − or a variety of cultures (Guild 1998). While the research and literature have examined learning styles and preferences across a number of disciplines, little attention has been placed on the culturally derived aspects, especially in post secondary education (Swanson 1995). Those studies that have examined this feature, however, suggest there are in fact culturally based variations.

For example, one recent study demonstrates learning style differences related to culture on the active-reflective scale. Based upon empirical data, researchers found that Eastern students (from China and Indonesia) preferred the reflector approach, whereas the Western students (French) favored activist learning methods (Charlesworth 2008). Another study included the concrete-abstract variable as well. The study, conducted in Australia, compared learning styles of accounting students from Hong Kong and Taiwan with those from Australia. The findings showed that the Chinese and Taiwanese students were more abstract and reflective, while the Australian students preferred more concrete and active methods of learning. The authors suggested that the difference was based upon the respectively collective and individualistic cultures (Auyeung and Sands 1996).

Similarly, a comparison of Australian students and those identified as Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) demonstrated differences in learning approaches. CHC generally has been described as an Asian tendency which promotes education as a central part of a per-

son's formation, resulting in universality of education. The role of the teacher is critical, not only with regard to education but also in terms of moral development. In this specific study, the students identified as CHC were from China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam. Those students were shown to have a preference for reflective methods, whereas the Australians were more activist learners (Barron and Arcodia 2002). The CHC students, however, were able to adapt somewhat to the more activist style when at an Australian university. The authors speculated that this flexibility was also prompted by other culturally based values, such as duty and hard work.

Comparing Turkish and American graduate students yielded a similar divide. In essence, the Turkish students expressed difficulty with a teaching methodology that included participation, interaction and reflective papers. Students remarked that the Turkish culture tends to prefer an authoritarian approach, with education from teacher to student (Cagiltay and Bichelmeyer 2000). I had the opportunity to discuss the study with Turkish teaching assistants this past summer who confirmed that the U.S. model of interactive teaching is still unfamiliar to most Turkish students.[7]

While the prior studies were based upon empirical research, anecdotal reporting also supports the notion of cultural variations in preferred teaching methods. Specifically, Su Wu in a personal account, traced the difficulty of transitioning from a preferred rote learning pedagogy in Chinese schools to the less structured and supervised approach in England (Wu 2002). This study, as well as my personal experience, and that of others (Abramson, *Outward Bound to Other Cultures*, in this volume) establish that prior education also impacts preferences for learning. Culture is also partially determinative of that past experience. For example, in Europe, although there has been some recent movement away from this approach, the more traditional way of teaching at the higher education level is primarily lecture, without any visual component. In addition, the interaction between student and teacher involves many fewer challenges to the "wisdom" of the professor than would be likely in the U.S.

Additional models of learning preferences no doubt exist. Each individual develops his or her learning style or preference over time. If we accept that this process is shaped by multiple, varied intelligences, and further recognize that those intelligences are in part a function of one's cultural heritage, it follows that culture itself is a major determinant in how we learn. Suffice it to say that instructors of nearly any discipline, including negotiation, should not only be cognizant of these differences, but should also work to construct teaching approaches with them in mind. Understanding and designing educational experiences in a way that directly relate to such

preferences are necessary and vital components of a next and improved teaching methodology in the field of negotiation.

Application to Learning Negotiation

Teachers and trainers should begin assessing negotiation courses in light of the teaching methodologies and how they relate to learning styles. While such an in-depth analysis, using the styles or preferences outlined above, is beyond the scope of this essay, I hope to continue to examine these learning styles in specific future negotiation courses, using both empirical research and subjective perspectives.[8] Numerous levels exist from which to examine these variables in negotiation courses, and trainers should consider how best to construct courses to assess learning needs of students from other cultures.

While many instructors intuitively mix teaching approaches, thereby allowing each of the information processing or learning modalities to be effective, such an approach assumes a variety of different learners in the class. As negotiation courses proliferate, instructors may likely encounter situations where one approach is dominant. For example, although the majority of individuals in the U.S. – in fact, the world (De Vita 2001) – are visual processors, many in higher education recognize the need to include aspects of learning for verbal processors. It is possible to conceive of other cultures without visual dominance, where a PowerPoint presentation may be disruptive rather than instructive. (However, when information is delivered in a non-native language, participants have demonstrated a preference for a visual rather than verbal medium (De Vita 2001).

During the Rome training, I observed each of the presentations,[9] watching for how trainers used different learning approaches and how students reacted to them. I first focused on the three information receiving modalities: visual, verbal and kinesthetic. Complicating matters, however, is the fact that the Italian culture tends to utilize all three methods. Consequently, it is likely that students at the training were able to engage in each information processing mode. Most of the teaching modules contained each of the three approaches, although some instructors relied much more heavily on verbal communication through a lecture format. While most modules contained some type of simulation or role play thereby engaging the kinesthetic learner, this approach was used to a lesser degree than the others. The participants appeared to be engaged at all levels, although those with translation needs were solely focused on the language and did not attend noticeably to the visuals. This, however appears to be inconsistent with De Vita's study which found that

students relied much more on visuals when the verbal information was not in the native language. Without actually interviewing the students present, my observation is likely of little import, but perhaps worth additional consideration in subsequent programs.

On another level, I viewed the teaching modules with an eye toward the approach or appeal to the activist, reflector, theorist or pragmatic learner. In such a short course, with equally brief time for each module, a relatively high number of instructors were able to touch each of the categories. For the most part, however, the training as a whole seems to be much more designed for the activists. The students were actively engaged in conducting a number of role plays and problems. While some time was devoted to debriefing, relatively little opportunity existed for those individuals who prefer private reflection. In addition, most of the debriefing occurred in the large group, as opposed to small groups. Use of small groups, and time for written journaling are important learning tools for reflectors. A few of the modules did touch on theory, such as outlining the different approaches to negotiation, with probably the least amount of time addressing the needs of the pragmatist. For those students who prefer theoretical approaches, it may be possible, even in short courses, to provide additional academic framework through the use of outside reading. Probably the least amount of training time was spent addressing the needs of the pragmatist. The account of negotiating the price of a hotel room, however, was a good example of the use of practical application, which resonates with the pragmatist learner. Increasing the use of concrete, and to the extent possible, directly relevant, examples — in both discussion and role play — can enrich learning for the pragmatist.

Awareness and expertise of the dominant learning styles of the culture will enable a better assessment of the impact of these different methods. Ideally, the next step in this line of analysis will be to determine the students' preferences prior to the training. For example, the planned program in Turkey presents an opportunity to test the hypothesis that training and education are more effective when learning approaches match those the participants or students prefer. Based upon the Cagiltay and Bichelmeyer study, and my informal but direct discussions with the Turkish teaching assistants, if the trainees are Turkish, then the teaching methodology should be less interactive. On the other hand, if trainers determine that the interactive style remains the best way to learn negotiation, trainers should then make efforts to inform students of expectations in advance (Abramson, *Outward Bound to Other Cultures*, in this volume). Another option, which will also explicitly address facets of learning, is to provide a mechanism for the students and instructors to co-

create the learning environment (Nelken, McAdoo, and Manwaring, *Negotiating Learning Environments*, in this volume).

One specific factor worth consideration in relation to learning style or preference is the use of role plays or simulations. For example, while an activist learner may be highly engaged in and by a role play, reflectors need more time for contemplation and thinking. When designing the course with a more activist learning group, the time allocation for role playing should therefore be increased if feasible. Conversely, in the case of simulation use with a more reflector-dominated group, much more time should be devoted to de-briefing and journaling the experience, rather than the actual negotiation. Likewise, sequential learners will need the negotiation process to be examined in light of its stages, whereas the global student will prefer and relate better to the overall comprehensive view of the process.

Addressing cultural differences in learning provides additional means for understanding the breadth of cultural impacts. While the focus of this symposium and book has been on trainers and teachers, with the objective of informing their work, a deliberate recognition and acknowledgement of learning and information processing does, in fact, both directly and indirectly influence the work of negotiators. Negotiators are often called to "teach" others, in effect — about positions, issues, interests, perspectives, and at a basic level, communication. Their own "teaching" during negotiation will be enhanced if negotiation trainees are cognizant of the cultural differences in learning. As trainers begin to deliberately address these differences in learning approaches, negotiation students hone skills on at least two levels. On one level, students are provided enhanced learning of the negotiation process. On another level, an explicit recognition and accommodation of differences in learning styles models for the students the need to also be mindful of individual differences of those with whom they negotiate. In doing so, negotiators improve skills in the actual process.

Next Steps

"True instruction begins when instructors understand their students" (Felder and Brent at 69).

Others have noted that part of designing teaching programs involves advance assessment of and partnership with the students (Nelken, McAdoo, and Manwaring, *Negotiating Learning Environments*, in this volume). As instructors and learners negotiate the learning process,

they should first engage in information exchange about learning preferences. In doing so, not only will trainers become more aware of different methods of teaching, students will likely also be introduced to other forms of pedagogy. Certainly, individuals are adaptive, and most can learn regardless of the teaching methods used. Yet, if we are sincere about improving the quality of negotiation training, we must put more effort into thoughtfully matching the teaching approaches with the student pool.

This chapter has just begun to scratch the surface in term of cultural impact on learning and how it informs future negotiation training and teaching internationally. For example, another facet of consideration is the training site. The impact of dissimilar teaching methods decreases if the international students are in the U.S., as research demonstrates the tendency of students to assimilate into the "home" university (Barron and Arcodia 2002). On the other hand, when U.S. trainers work in foreign venues, then accommodating students' learning preferences is essential. Further in-depth study is also needed on other components of learning, such as the impact of culture and experience on closely related factors like achievement or aspiration.

Learning preferences must be included in any course design. The next training in Istanbul provides an opportunity to further develop and test the hypotheses related to learning styles and negotiation teaching. Consulting with local education experts in advance of course design will allow explicit consideration of these factors. As we redesign how we teach and train, we must consider the cultural aspects of learning from a variety of perspectives, and consult with others from a variety of disciplines, including education and specifically multicultural education. In addition, advance inquiry directed at the students themselves could provide a great deal of information prior to course design.

In this effort, we may also find additional alternatives in terms of teaching approaches. Role plays should be reexamined and recreated to be relevant for each location and subject matter. Allocation of training time should also be made in light of our improved understanding of learning preferences. Another component of learning, assessment and evaluation, must also take into account cultural variations. All of these together comprise a true recognition of diversity. If we now see that individuals do not learn in the same way, and assessment is a component of learning, then it is critical that we begin to understand cultural variations in assessment, testing and evaluation. As efforts to enhance negotiation teaching and training expand, it seems likely that attempts at improved evaluation will as

well. Deliberate study of this component is part of the future next steps in this overall effort.

Notes

[1] When the term "culture" is used here, it is in its broadest sense. Such reference is not only to what many first think of about culture – an ethnic or national basis for shared beliefs and behavior – but also quite broadly so for the systems of knowledge shared by a relatively large group of people. In this expansive way, it is cultivated behavior; that is, the socially transmitted totality of a person's learned, accumulated experience.

[2] It is important to recognize that most of these statements embody a form of stereotyping, and certainly in each and every culture, individual differences are important. Yet there are general principles which have been identified and can inform our interactions with one another. These are the aspects of culture to which I refer.

[3] The first program was sponsored by Tulane School of Law and was conducted at Humbolt University in Berlin, August 2004.

[4] The Texas Mediation Trainers' Roundtable is an organization created in 1992 by those who were actively involved in training and teaching mediators in accordance with the Texas statute, which provides for forty hours of training. The author was one of the founding members. The trainers voluntarily came together in an attempt to provide some consistency in the trainings across the state. Standards were enacted which provide for both the content and manner of training. See http://tmtr.org/StandardsFolder/40hr-training.htm.

[5] For example, in Minnesota, Minnesota General Rule of Practice for District Courts, Rule 114.13(a) outlines specific content areas which must be included as well as the required training methodology. In Georgia, a number of Rules enacted by the Georgia Commission on Dispute Resolution prescribe training methodology. See http://www.godr.org/adrrules.html and http://www.godr.org/trainer_resource.html.

[6] Understanding that a number of differences exist in defining learning style versus preference, nonetheless for the sake of simplicity for this essay I will refer to how people learn by both terms.

[7] While teaching a course at Bahcesehir in Istanbul, I met with the Teaching Assistants to Professor Feridun Yenisy of the Faculty of Law.

[8] I anticipate personally engaging in a substantial amount of additional observation and research into these factors over the next two years, asking the students directly in additional trainings and working with educational consultants in various cultures.

[9] I realize that the observations occurred without the specific knowledge and consent of those presenters. The stated objectives of the program, however, explicitly included providing an opportunity for other teachers to observe the Rome "benchmarking" instructors' teaching methodologies and approaches, as a point of departure for developing the next generation of negotiation training. Accordingly, I do not believe this commentary is unfair or unexpected.

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