

## **Exploring cultural norms**

A workshop held in Vilnius on April 30th, 2004 as part of the project Knowing me, knowing you (Grundtvig 2) for a multicultural group.

Duration: 1 hour

Tools needed: overhead projector, sitting groups in a comfortable distance from each other.

### **.A The aim of the exercise**

The idea behind the workshop was to make people aware of cultural differences, make them think about their own and other cultures, help them to understand that we all have a lot of stereotypes about other cultures and tend to think that our own behaviour is the only “natural” one.

The aim was a deeper understanding of the value of diversity and the development of skills in intercultural communication.

### **.B Instruction of the exercise**

The meeting started with a humouristic approach to the problem.

The following text was presented on a overhead and at the same time read loudly by the facilitator:

#### **DESERTED ISLANDS**

**On a group of beautiful deserted islands in the middle of nowhere, there are:**

**two Italian men and one Italian woman  
two French men and one French woman  
two German men and one German woman  
two Greek men and one Greek woman  
two English men and one English woman  
two Bulgarian men and one Bulgarian woman  
two Japanese men and one Japanese woman  
two Chinese men and one Chinese woman  
two American men and one American woman  
two Australian men and one Australian woman  
two New Zealander men and one New Zealander woman  
two Irish men and one Irish woman.**

**One month later on these absolutely stunning deserted islands in the middle of nowhere, the following things have occurred:**

**One Italian man killed the other Italian man for the Italian woman.**

**The two French men and the French woman are living happily together in a menage-à-trois.**

**The two German men have a strict weekly schedule of alternating visits with the German woman.**

**The two Greek men are sleeping with each other and the Greek woman is cleaning and cooking for them.**

**The two English men are waiting for someone to introduce them to the English woman.**

**The two Bulgarian men took one long look at the endless ocean and another long look at the Bulgarian woman and started swimming.**

**The two Japanese men have faxed Tokyo and are awaiting instructions.**

**The two Chinese men have set up a pharmacy liquor store/restaurant/laundry, and have gotten the woman pregnant in order to supply employees for their store.**

**The two American men are contemplating the virtues of suicide, because the American woman keeps on complaining about her body, the true nature of feminism, how she can do everything they can do, the necessity of fulfillment, the equal division of household chores, how sand and palm trees make her look fat, how her last boyfriend respected her opinion and treated her nicer than they do, and how her relationship with her mother is improving, and how at least the taxes are low and it isn't raining.**

**The two Australian men beat each other senseless fighting over the Australian woman, who is checking out all the other men.**

**Both New Zealand men are searching the island for sheep.**

**The two Irish men divided the island into North and South and set up a distillery. They do not remember if sex is in the picture because it**

**gets sort of foggy after the first few liters of coconut whiskey. But they are satisfied because at least the English are not having any fun.  
(Source unknown)**

The use of humour was deliberate. The main reasons for that were: Humouristic texts are often based on stereotypes and while they presumably make people laugh, they also convey the understanding that when other people describe one's own culture as a cliché, there is a strong possibility that one's own approach to other cultures also might contain elements of prejudice. In addition humor is a good way of breaking the ice in the beginning of a session and make people feel a little more at ease with each other.

After the introduction the co-ordinator divided people into groups of four persons according to their favourite colour. This was done in order to secure diverse groups and avoid that participants only talked to people they had met before.

The groups gathered together and were given the following topic to discuss:

“Give an example of a cultural behaviour that you do not understand. See if anyone in the group can explain it too you. Give an example from your culture that someone from another culture might have difficulty understanding.”<sup>1</sup>

### **C. Estimation/evaluation/Conclusion**

The discussion went on for about half an hour. The participants were very eager to discuss the matter and none of the groups wanted to terminate the discussion. The facilitator had to put the group work at an end because time was running out.

After the group work the group was gathered in full session and the co-ordinator asked each group to give some examples of what they had been discussing. A very interesting discussion followed where we experienced that we were a group of great diversity and had difficulties in agreeing in a common approach.

The facilitator had a hard time trying to conclude the discussion on the basis of a common agreement. She proposed that we could at least agree on the respect of the universal declaration of human rights. Some participants argued against this proposal because they consider this declaration as a western approach. Others disagreed and argued on the grounds that the declaration is genuinely universal.

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<sup>1</sup> (The topic was found in the following book:

Samovar, Larry A.

Communication between cultures / Larry A. Samovar, Richard E. Porter. - Belmont, Calif. : Wadsworth Pub., c1991. - ISBN: 0-534-15006-3)

At the end we concluded by saying that we would at least respect freedom of speech.

The conclusion one might gather could be that when it comes to culture, people feel very personally affected and they have strong meanings about what is right and wrong. Of course, that was not an unexpected reaction when we know that some scientists mean that we are culturally programmed by the age of three. Nevertheless, it is important to conduct this kind of exercises although they tend to stir up strong feelings and disagreements. On the long term one learns from discussing with people who have completely different approaches and at least theoretically and intellectually understands that we all see the world through our own cultural filters.

Facilitator

Kiriaki Papadopoulou Samuelsen

Teacher of norwegian as a second language