



Gośka Tur

HOW TO CONDUCT EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES IN MULTICULTURAL AND MULTINATIONAL GROUPS

**Stowarzyszenie Trenerów Organizacji Pozarządowych
(NGO Trainers' Association) Warszawa 2021**
www.stowarzyszeniestop.pl

*Educational material financed from funds received from
NIW-CRSO under The Civil Society Organisations
Development Programme for 2018-2030 CSODP (PROO).*



As you are ahead of your first international training, workshop, or another educational activity, do you feel a bit unsure? Or maybe you already work with such groups, but you sometimes wonder if you do not commit any blunders?

This article can support you in getting more confidence, as we will cover issues such as:

- ▶ What to consider when designing an international educational activity?
- ▶ What cultural and religious differences should you pay attention to?
- ▶ What to keep in mind to effectively support the educational processes of participants from different cultures and nations?

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN DESIGNING AN INTERNATIONAL EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITY?

“Will this game work in an international group?” is one of the numerous questions you might be asking yourself while designing a training programme.

Some tips to help you at this stage are:

- ▶ **PLAN MORE TIME FOR EVERY ACTIVITY.**
You will be working in a foreign language to most or all participants, which usually means that discussions take more time, as people speak slowly.
- ▶ **USE PLAIN LANGUAGE FOR INSTRUCTIONS.**
Written or visual forms help a lot!
- ▶ **MAKE SURE THE QUOTES AND EXAMPLES YOU WANT TO USE ARE ALSO KNOWN IN THE PARTICIPANTS' COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN.**
If you use metaphors or refer to books in the training, consider that some of the participants may not have had them on the school reading list!



- ▶ **CONSIDER WHICH COUNTRIES THE PARTICIPANTS COME FROM AND WHAT CULTURAL DIMENSIONS CHARACTERISE THEM.**

See the next chapter for more tips on possible cultural traps.



- ▶ **CHECK IF YOUR TRAINING CONTENT IS NOT SUBJECT TO CULTURAL OR RELIGIOUS TABOOS.**

For example, it will be challenging to discuss identity or gender openly in some cultures.



- ▶ **FIND OUT ABOUT THE RULES OF CONTACT BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN IN THE PARTICIPANTS' COUNTRIES.**

This will help you to foresee resistance to working in mixed subgroups. If you are planning games or energisers, it is essential to find out if the cultural norms of the participants allow touching the opposite sex. This should not usually be an obstacle among participants from European countries. Still, in many other regions of the world, cultural norms prohibit physical contact (even a handshake) with a stranger of the opposite gender/sex.



THE HIDDEN DIMENSIONS OF CULTURE

Each of us is born in a given culture, and it is easy to notice some cultural traits in cuisine, clothing, language, behaviour, and architecture. But there are many more invisible traits, for instance: perception of time, the concept of leadership, the idea of justice, division of roles between men and women, attitude to time and problem-solving strategies, attitude to cooperation and competition, the concept of wisdom and madness, and many more. And they will all mix – and sometimes clash – in your training room!

What should you, therefore, know about the dimensions of culture?

Dimensions of culture are a degree of intensity of specific values and norms in a given culture. They talk about scales on which national cultures can be ranked, for example, the level of power

distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity (female versus male cultures), individualism versus collectivism, long term orientation, indulgence, etc.

Getting to know the concept will enable you to get this “aha!” moment and finally understand some problems you have had so far in multicultural groups, e.g.:

- ▶ Why torn jeans might be an appropriate trainer’s outfit in Denmark but not in Russia?
- ▶ Why in some countries people are never prone to argue and discuss with you, even if you encourage them to do it?
- ▶ Why nationals of Anglo-Saxon countries will be super happy to compete with others, but most of the world will prefer cooperation?
- ▶ Why not only your university degree and diploma but also age, gender and the number of children might matter to your workshop group?
- ▶ Why some participants come to the session 2 hours late without notice and without feeling guilty etc., but others are on time or even earlier than you?

Before your training activity, read more about the dimensions of culture at the source! An excellent explanation with maps is presented by a leading scientist and father of cultural dimensions, prof. Geert Hofstede¹.



Are you expecting participants from other countries and want to check how similar or different your cultures are? No problem! At the website of Hofstede Insights Institute², you will find a convenient country comparison tool, ready to support you with clear graphs and additional explanations.

¹ <https://geerthofstede.com/culture-geert-hofstede-gert-jan-hofstede/6d-model-of-national-culture/>

² <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/product/compare-countries/>

WHAT ABOUT RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCES?

I hope that even in a nationally homogeneous group, you **do not assume that all training participants profess the same religion and follow the same religious norms and values.**

This situation will be even more visible in the international group! Here are some tips to follow:

- ▶ When preparing the training, consider whether there is an **important religious holiday during the period** – this may hinder or prevent the participation of representatives of other religions. There is plenty of diversity or multi-faith calendars available on the internet to help you out with the task!
- ▶ Some religions foresee **periods of fasting**. For example, adult and healthy Muslims celebrate Ramadan by fasting between sunrise and sunset for one month of the year. Fasting may weaken participants, and they will be reluctant to be physically active.
- ▶ **Get acquainted with restrictions imposed by religious principles** that can impact your educational activity, such as dietary restrictions and behavioural norms, e.g. about the interaction between men and women.
- ▶ Be aware of the **differences in values and beliefs, depending on the participants' religion**. For example, a popular phrase says “you live only once”, sometimes used to encourage participants to try out new things – do not be surprised when a Hindu devotee will disagree with you, replying to this “we live to be born again”.

LANGUAGE-RELATED PITFALLS

Some of the most common language-related pitfalls you might come across in an international setting:

- ▶ **People don't know the proper meaning of words in a foreign language.**
The so-called false friends are words that sound familiar, but their translation is completely different. E.g. in Polish, the word “No”

actually means “Yes” (“no” means something like “yeah” in English).

▶ **Mistakes related to the above: misinterpretation of foreign words.**

It usually occurs when several participants in a multinational training session speak their language, and someone from another country listens to it. E.g. as a Pole, if I hear Finnish people speaking of “matka”, I might think they refer to “mother” (matka in Polish) and that they are talking of their family issues. But actually, matka in Finnish means “travel”, and the participants are planning their journey back home!

To minimise the risk of likely conflicts, it is worth referring to the possibility of similar misunderstandings at the beginning of the training and encouraging the interlocutors not to attribute bad intentions but to explain the situations that disturb us calmly.

▶ **Differences in meaning assigned to a given word.**

I invite you to an experiment: at an international training course, ask the participants *How old does a church have to be to be called old?*. Italians will aim for 500-700 years, Australians – 100 at most. That’s a few hundred per cent difference!

▶ **The same differences will exist in the meaning of many other words.**

For example, what does it mean to “be a little late”, “make a short report” or “not drink much tonight”?

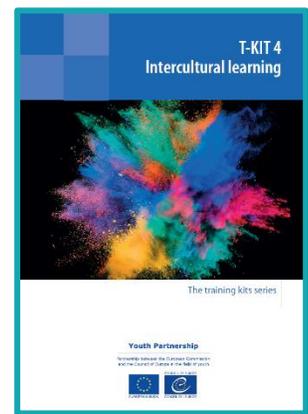
To avoid frustration, use precise language and explain as much as possible the meaning behind a concept – e.g.:

1. *Today we will talk about old churches, i.e. those which are at least two hundred years old*
2. *Punctuality to me means showing up in the training room at least one minute before the start of the session.*

CURIOUS TO LEARN MORE?

If you want to deepen your knowledge on how to lead great educational activities while respecting the diversity of cultures and backgrounds of your training participants, check out the Council of Europe publication **“T-Kit 4: Intercultural learning”**³ (available for free) with both theoretical concepts explained, as well as plenty of ideas for intercultural activities – all in a reader-friendly manner!

Good luck with working with your multicultural and multinational groups!



Note on the author

Gośka Tur combines her MA in sociology with almost 25 years' experience of working as a trainer in multicultural settings. As a life-long activist (and former International President) of Service Civil International – a global peace movement – she cooperates with persons from over 100 countries, navigating swiftly between various cultural contexts while volunteering for a better world.

³ <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/t-kit-4-intercultural-learning>