Is the Group Activity Food or Poison in a Multicultural Classroom?

By Wei-Wen Chang

Group activity in a multicultural classroom has been advocated as an effective method for bridging cultural differences and creating a sense of team membership. For example, in the September 1996 T+D article “Making Training Friendly to Other Cultures,” author Zhuoran Huang (an instructional designer and multimedia specialist) suggests providing more group exercises and activities to encourage teamwork.

Many people believe that working as a group or a small team will encourage trainees to help each other and learn together, and that this will lessen the multicultural barrier.

However, in many cases, group activities will not bring such desired outcomes. For example, one Japanese trainee who attended an American training program said, “One of my
biggest fears was when the teacher would ask us to form a team because I was always one of the few people who were invited into a group.” An Asian trainee mentioned, “Our group mission was to identify the critical economic incidents in American history. Although I was on a team, they preferred not to discuss it with me because my lack of background knowledge would slow down our speed in the team competition.”

Such complaints are voiced or suppressed in many multicultural classrooms where the instructor uses group activities in the hope of enhancing the connection among classmates of different backgrounds. In these cases, the small group can divide participants and act as a roadblock to learning.

Without appropriate facilitation, group activities could create even more segregation and misunderstanding. Putting people together in a group does not necessarily lead to team building or cultural integration. Laurent Andre, a professor of organizational behavior at INSEAD, found that managers with different backgrounds who worked for the same multicultural company maintained and even strengthened their cultural differences.

As Nancy J. Adler, a professor of International Management at McGill University, wrote, “when working in a multicultural company, it appears that Germans become more German, Americans become more American, and Swedish become more Swedish, and so on.” It seems that when working with people from different cultural groups, employees sometimes become more aware of the differences and consciously or unconsciously want to maintain their cultural identity. Instructors must be aware of these tendencies when facilitating small groups and ensure that the environment encourages—rather than derails—learning.

Creating successful multicultural group activities
To successfully apply group activities to a training course in a multicultural setting, the process of the group activity needs to be monitored by the instructor. Following are four suggestions on how to avoid the negative side effects of group activities in multicultural settings so that the environment is conducive to optimal learning:

1) Provide equal opportunities for grouping. The first step in encouraging inclusion begins before participants form their groups. To reduce the number of situations such as that which the Japanese trainee mentioned, the instructor could provide each trainee with a number, and those with the same number would be in the same group; or divide them according to the month of their birthday if their background information could be obtained in advance. These techniques are particularly useful in the early stages of the course or when there are existing subgroups among the classmates who make newcomers’ participation more difficult.
2) Encourage equal opportunity for contribution. In a multicultural setting, all participants should have opportunities to be involved in the group’s mission. Ask participants to share their desired learning outcomes at the beginning of the session, then tailor group activities to meet those needs. Group activities that require very specific knowledge about only one culture should be eliminated because they exclude the participation of people from other backgrounds. As indicated in the earlier example, the Asian participant had difficulty in getting involved due to her lack of knowledge regarding the issues because her team members felt the need to speed the discussion to win the competition. Rather than bridging the differences, such a design had increased the gap between both sides.
3) Keep an eye on the group interaction. During group activities, the instructor can walk around to monitor the trainees’ interaction. If some group members (particularly learners in minority groups) are consistently left out of a discussion, the instructor can gently join in the group, raise a few questions, and include those people who tend to be quiet. P. Nick Blanchard and James Thacker suggest the less intrusive trainer approach of not rushing to fill the silence, but instead providing the trainees with more time, and if necessary, asking them to write out an answer. Usually, trainees are more willing to answer if they have the opportunity to prepare in advance.
4) Recognize the influence of culture on learning approaches. In a multicultural classroom, I observed two groups of participants having a very intense debate regarding whether “willingness to speak out” should be viewed as a desired learning approach and outcome. Coming from learning environments in which participants are usually encouraged to express their opinions, trainees with central-American and U.S. backgrounds argued that speaking for oneself is critical for learning. If one cannot do so, she should be trained to reach such a desired behavior. On the other hand, some participants from Africa and Asia...
explained that they were taught to value silence and use it in their learning. "Being silent does not mean that I am not learning. Rather, it gives me time to think," a participant argued.

Such debate indicates that each learning style is actually guided by the learner's deep beliefs, which are rooted in his cultural values. Training instructors need to recognize cultural influence and avoid using one-method-fits-all approaches. Many experiences have shown that if we highlight only one approach, those who favor different approaches often feel excluded.

Such exclusive feelings, according to social psychologists, may raise one's resistance to the training due to the natural tendency to maintain one's identity. In other words, the over-emphasis of a "speaking-out approach" may make the silent learners even more silent, and vice versa. To combat this problem, instructors can present several valid learning approaches that encourage various cultural perspectives, and ask participants to share the methods that work best for them, so they learn from each other.

The trainer's responsibility

Faced with more diverse training settings, today's training instructors need to manage more cultural issues and challenges than ever. As instructors, we also carry our own cultural baggage. Thus, it is helpful to remember that our perspective represents a single perspective, rather than the universal one. Such recognition helps us to avoid mistakes of unconsciously judging participants from our own cultural framework and pushing participants even further away.

Instructors must also intentionally manage group activities to support learning in these settings. By creating equal grouping, encouraging equal contribution, monitoring participant interaction, and recognizing the influence of culture, instructors can turn any multicultural small group into a thriving learning environment.

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