

CULTURAL LEARNING



CENTER FOR
INTERNATIONAL
STUDIES

For many students, a goal of study abroad is to learn more about culture. This can be challenging, though, because our own cultures are so ingrained. To make cultural learning a priority, consider the following.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

Culture is the typical and shared behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, values, language, and customs of a particular group of people. It is the way of living in the world, learned unconsciously from the time we are children. We often don't even think that we have a culture ourselves, because it is internalized to such a degree that we come to think the way we think and behave is just "normal." It is only when we spend time in a new culture that we may even notice differences in the way people behave and engage.

VISIBLE CULTURE AND INVISIBLE CULTURE

There are many aspects of another culture that are visible, such as styles of dress, styles of architecture and built environment, food, religion, and arts. These tend to be the first things people comment on when they go abroad (understandable, as they are most visible) and the things they seek to find.

Invisible culture refers to the underlying values and beliefs that motivate the people and that influence the ways they interact and the ways they create their visible culture. Invisible culture can be easily overlooked or misunderstood, because it is not easily recognized or explained. We sometimes have simplistic reactions to invisible culture: when we label people as "quaint" (even though this seems kind, it's stereotypical); or when we label people as rude or even ignorant.

RESOURCES TO LEARN MORE ABOUT YOUR COUNTRY'S CULTURE

Country-specific Handbooks: <http://www.studentsabroad.com/>

Culturgrams: <http://www.culturegram.org/>

Global Road Warriors: log on to TCU Library system, then go to <http://www.globalroadwarrior.com.ezproxy.tcu.edu/home.asp?logout=&reports=>

Guidebooks: (for example, Let's Go, Lonely Planet, Rick Steves, Frommers, Rough Guides)

U.S. Department of State Country Specific Information:
<http://travel.state.gov/content/passports/english/country.html>

Visit with people who have been there: study abroad alumni, faculty members, international students

INCREASING YOUR CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE

To move beyond simplistic, stereotypical labels and reactions, we need to work intentionally to learn about culture. Below are some typical reactions and suggested action steps that may help you move forward in your cultural learning.

- 1. I want to learn more about their culture, but I don't see any differences.** If you're not even sure where to look for cultural differences, try these activities:
 - Talk to people from the host country and ask lots of questions, about family life, education, holidays, role models, historical figures, etc.
 - Compare local products, advertisements, shows, sports stars, or movies with U.S. ones, and think about reasons for the differences.
- 2. I don't know why they do things the way they do. Their lives would be easier if they did it my way:** If you see the differences between their culture and yours, but think they would really be better if they were more like you, try some of these activities:
 - Search for common ground. What special events do you have in common with the host country? Maybe it's a sporting event, music concert, holiday, or celebration.
 - Challenge yourself to find something, no matter how small, that you prefer in your host country to your home country: a certain phrase, a new perspective, a special place.
 - Explore things from the country - movies, museums, sports. Dig deeper into what is unique about the place.
- 3. We're really all the same deep down, and that's all that matters:** If you think that our common humanity overrides cultural differences, or that we should really just stop worrying about cultural differences, consider some of these activities:
 - Join a club or sports team and notice the similarities and differences in how the group operates compared to teams at home.
 - Really listen to your friends' views and make sure that you don't miss key differences, because you're focused on similarities.
 - Read more local newspapers, books and magazine to learn how people in the host country really view the world.
- 4. I'm going to be just like them, I just need to learn how. No more American for me:** If you find yourself wanting to change yourself and blend in, try some of these activities:
 - Watch your local friends in conversations with other locals, and see what you learn about their communication style, topics of conversation, and values. Then join in!
 - Don't feel like you have to give up your American identity. You can be multifaceted.
- 5. I feel like a chameleon:** If you can evaluate other people's behavior from their frame of reference and can unconsciously adapt your behavior to fit the norms of a different culture, you are successfully a part of their culture. This does not mean you have to suspend your identity or fully agree with the idea, behavior, attitude, etc. It means you are open, flexible, and curious, aware of other perspectives and ready to learn more.

(Adapted from a Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (p.102-105) in [Maximizing Study Abroad: A Students' Guide to Strategies for Language and Culture Learning and Use](#). 2002).

How can you learn about culture when it just doesn't make sense?

When you feel frustrated or confused in your daily encounters and activities, stop and

Change your LENS



Look objectively and **L**ist what occurred:

What happened?

Describe it, and take note of judgmental words (i.e., rude, awful, irritating) or stereotypes.

If there is negativity, eliminate judgmental words, and describe the encounter or event objectively.

Examine your assumptions and **E**xplore inside:

Why did you feel the way you did?

What are the expectations, habits, and beliefs that led you to view the encounter or event as you did?

Be introspective and describe your attitudes.

Note other possibilities **N**udge yourself to grow:

What other values, habits, and beliefs might be at work here?

Be open-minded and curious. Empathize. Retell the story from another person's perspective. Consider the ways the incident is more complex than you initially realized.

Substantiate with locals and **S**eek out more:

Is this their truth?

Use your observation, intercultural communication skills, critical thinking skills, and people skills. Ask locals or bicultural people if the new ideas you have generated are accurate, or if there are other parts of the culture you have overlooked.

What else does this make you want to explore? How does this change you and your behaviors, mindsets, and thoughts?