

Cross-cultural understanding



Background Briefs
Development issues and efforts

The issue

People who share a history, experience and geography develop a culture. Culture is made up of all the ideas, beliefs, values, knowledge, language and way of life a group of people shares. We express our culture through such things as foods, celebrations, music, art, laws, customs, rituals and language. Culture is not taught. We learn our culture by living it.

Our culture and life experiences determine how we make decisions. We decide what is right or wrong and respectful or disrespectful, based on what our parents and other important people in our life teach us. This code of behaviour is passed on from generation to generation. Changes occur very slowly. We use this code of behaviour to help us decide how to think and act; e.g., in our culture, it is acceptable to eat French fries with our fingers, use a spoon to eat soup and eat our food from our own individual plate.

We subconsciously apply this code when we come across something new. We use it to determine whether we think the unfamiliar is the “right” or “wrong” way to behave.

Suppose you are from a culture where you learned to eat in a different way. Perhaps you learned that the right way to eat was not with a spoon or fork, but to use only the fingers of your right hand to take food from a shared common plate in the centre of the table and to drink your soup from the bowl. If you saw a North American eating, you might think

about what you learned and think that people who eat as North Americans do have very bad manners.

Culture is more than just manners. It is also the way we speak. In some cultures, people may speak in a way that North Americans think is too loud. They may also be very emotional in the way they speak, or they may stand very close together to talk. It is perfectly normal for the people of that culture, but we might think they are yelling at us or crowding us. They, on the other hand, may think we are not very interested in talking to them.

Unfortunately, people often think their own way is the right way. Thinking that someone else is wrong or disrespectful because they do not follow our customs and beliefs leads to **cross-cultural misunderstanding**.

The road to cross-cultural understanding

Cross-cultural understanding is more than realizing another culture is different from ours. The way to cross-cultural understanding is to learn to recognize individual differences and gain an appreciation, respect and knowledge of other cultures that are different from our own.

If you put on a pair of sunglasses with pink lenses, everything will take on a rose-



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coloured tint. If the lenses are green, then the world will take on a green tint. Our culture acts as a lens through which we look at the world. We have a “tinted” view of the world so it looks more like what we already know. This acts as a filter, straining out the other’s point of view and enhancing our own.

Cultural filters can get in the way of understanding people from other cultures because they appear different. We cannot get rid of our cultural filters but we can be open-minded about cultural differences. We can set aside our biases. This is more than just realizing that another culture is different from ours. Cross-cultural understanding means learning to value other cultures and respect their views. This comes when people move from thinking that “different” means “wrong,” to thinking that there might be another way, to being tolerant and accepting.

Projects to promote cross-cultural understanding

In the past, Europeans thought that their culture was better than any other. When they came in contact with other cultures, they tried to impose the European culture on them. That has changed. Canadians, working through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), make every effort to develop an understanding of other cultures when they interact with them. CIDA sponsors a number of projects to promote cross-cultural understanding.

Helping Canadian youth develop cultural understanding: CIDA manages the federal government’s International Youth Internship Program (IYIP). It is part of the Canadian government’s larger Youth Employment Strategy. The program offers Canadian university and college graduates career-

related work in a United Nations setting. The CIDA-funded internships are in countries such as Namibia, Cambodia, Mali, Laos and Rwanda. The interns receive cross-cultural training before they travel to the project countries.

Training youth for work abroad: CIDA finances an intern program to help young people work overseas. They receive training in cultural understanding and work in such areas as business development and education. They believe that the program not only makes them a more aware global citizen, but a better Canadian citizen as well.

Launching immigrant and refugee artists: Working with the Creativity and Innovation Company, CIDA is helping immigrant and refugee artists practise their craft and earn a living. Participants work one-on-one with an advisor to expand the audience for their work and build connections across the country. The program will also break down cultural barriers and build cultural understanding.

Find more information about:

- CIDA’s work with the Government of Canada’s Youth Employment Strategy at <http://international.bowvalleycollege.ca/projects-partnerships/internships/stories-from-the-field>
- CIDA’s work with the International Youth Internship Program (IYIP) at <http://www.acc.ca/international/9899-4-1/internship.htm>
- Cross-cultural understanding at <http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/educators/lessonplans/section.cfm?sid=4>.



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