

## THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL COMPETENCE TO INFORMAL LEARNING ATTRACTIONS

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Culture is a lot like water to fish. It sustains us. We live and breathe through it. A fish only discovers its need for water when it is taken out of it. People are rarely aware of all the aspects of their own culture until they find themselves in another culture. Then, they become aware how ubiquitous their culture is to all aspects of their lives.

Culture comes in layers, like an onion. To understand it you have to unpeel it layer by layer. On the outer layer are the explicit, observable products of the culture such as the language, food, architecture, fashions and art. They are, however, only symbols of deeper layers of culture. Values and norms are the middle layer of culture and more difficult to identify. Norms are the mutual sense a group has of what is "right" and "wrong." Norms are reflected in laws and rules of conduct. Values determine the definition of "good" and "bad." Norms address how a person should behave, whereas values deal with how a person aspires to behave. What is taken for granted—unquestioned reality, core assumptions—is at the core of culture. These are the things, that when questioned, cannot be answered and provoke confusion and irritation. In the US, asking someone why he or she believes all people are equal only brings frustration. In the East, asking someone why he or she believes in arranged marriages would bring the same frustration.

Although many of the same products will appear in different cultures, they do not necessarily reflect the same values or meaning. To someone in Moscow, eating at a McDonald's is a status symbol, while to a New Yorker, it is only a quick meal for a few bucks. In other cultures, such as parts of Spain, what is designed to be a quick meal doesn't mesh with their custom of long dining experiences. The tables won't turn as fast, so to do the

same volume, a McDonald's needs more seating.

All too often, whether by ignorance or arrogance, informal learning venues designed and/or staffed by "foreigners" fail to match both the physical facility and operations to the culture of their guests. Western design firms typically produce projects from within their familiar Western cultural paradigm, without research and consideration of the unique cultural characteristics of the project's target market. This problem is greatest when Western design firms venture fur-



thest from their cultural-base into unfamiliar cultures, but can also occur when they are working in geographically close or related cultures. Examples of such cultural differences that need to be considered are:

- In the UK and most of Europe, a waiter will not remove plates from a table until everyone is finished. In the US, waiters remove plates as people finish. What is considered proper practice in one culture is considered rude in the other.
- Queuing and waiting your turn is the custom in most Western cultures. However, designing on the assumption that visitors will wait their turn and queue in an orderly manner in Italy or the Middle East, where the cultures are more synchronic, will only result in serious operational problems.

No culture is homogeneous. Differences between people within a culture can be vast—greater than their similarities—shaped by such factors as gender, class, ethnicity or socioeconomic status.

Even within the US, there is consider-

able variation in many aspects of culture from region to region; even city to city; sometimes even in different sections of the same city. For example, the restaurant industry long ago became aware of differences in cultural territorial spacing. The inches that separate adjoining tables in New York will be many feet in Omaha, Nebraska. Iced tea is served pre-sweetened in the southern US and parts of Canada, whereas, in other parts of North America, it is never served sweetened. Submarine, hoagie, hero, grinder, and poor-boy are all the same sandwich by different names depending where you are in North America.

Most areas of the US, as well as many other countries, have diverse ethnic populations, each with their own unique cultures and customs. It is important to not only consider the culture of the majority population, but to also consider those other cultures. One simple example is birthday party facilities. If you design them for Anglos, they will be too small for Latino families who hold large, multi-generational celebrations, and there will be no place for the traditional piñata breaking.

Being an ethnographer is not easy. Since culture is learned by constant reinforcement from parents and authority figures—it is usually just viewed as "the way things are." People find it very difficult to articulate the beliefs of their own culture. It usually takes an outsider to discern and articulate a culture's characteristics.

When an informal learning project is mismatched to the area's culture(s), not only is there the possibility that the message will not be conveyed effectively, but also the possibility that the experience will leave guests feeling ill at ease and uncomfortable, often not totally conscious of the reason. The effect on guests can sometimes be almost as drastic as what happens when you put a fresh water fish in salt water. Unlike a fish, guests do have the option of leaving the project and never coming back. When the management culture doesn't match the staff's, unhappy staff will create unhappy guests. Moreover, of course, cultural dissonance results in a project with less than ideal performance, even failure.

One way to analyze and understand a culture is to examine how it distinguishes itself from others by the solutions it chooses to the three universal problems faced by all cultures—relationships with people, time and nature. Each culture has a shared set of meanings and beliefs and distinguishes itself from others by the solutions it chooses to these problems which reveal themselves as dilemmas:

### Relationships with People

- *Universalism versus Particularism* – relying on rules, codes and laws versus exceptions, special circumstances and relationships.
- *Individualism versus Collectivism* – the importance of the individual and personal freedom versus the importance of the group and cooperative and harmonious relations.
- *Neutral versus Emotional* – the range of feelings expressed, whether interactions are detached or express emotion.
- *Specific versus Diffuse* – the degree of personal involvement in dealings, whether limited to the specific aspect of a transaction or with the whole person, requiring whole relationships.
- *Achievement versus Ascription* – how status is accorded by either what you have done and achieved versus who you are and who you are connected to.

### Attitudes about Time

- *Sequential or synchronic* – how the past, present and future relate to each other and which has greatest importance; whether time is considered as a sequence passing in a straight line or more as moving in a circle. The standard of punctuality can range from minutes to a day or more.

### Attitudes about the Natural Environment

- Whether the world is considered as more powerful than the individual or the individual is the source of vice and virtue; whether society should be subordinate to, in harmony with or master nature.

The solutions cultures chose to these dilemmas are never either/or, but rather fall somewhere along a continuum between the dilemmas.

Culturally competent informal learning venue design and management requires an approach that:

- first researches in depth the location's culture, and not just its visible elements, but its core values and norms and how it deals with the universal dilemmas, and
- then examines conventional Western education and entertainment concepts to see how they should be adapted to that particular culture.

Then it's time to look for design and management solutions that don't exist in the West, but which will work within that



cultural context. It's like trying to rewrite the evolution of that particular type of location-based informal learning venue. You have to try to determine what it would look like today if it had evolved in that culture, rather than in the West.

Culturally competent design requires extensive research and planning. It is extensive up-front cultural research that produces long-term success. Although some of the research can be based upon published information, most of the research needs to look at the subtle cultural considerations that can only be unearthed by an astute trained observer who conducts research on-site. This research needs to include trained observations and qualitative research with interviews, and possibly focus groups.

When Western concepts and designs are literally exported to other cultures, not only does it stifle the project's success and is disrespectful to the guests, staff and their culture, but the effect can be to subtly undermine the very cultural foundations of the society where the project is located.

The crew of the *Enterprise* in "Star Trek" television series followed a Prime Directive when they encountered other cultures:

The right of each sentient species to live in accordance with its normal cultural evolution is considered sacred. No *Star Fleet* personnel may interfere with the healthy development of alien life or culture.

We at the White Hutchinson Leisure & Learning Group believe that all projects should follow a similar standard. Therefore, in our work, we have adopted the following prime directive:

The Prime Directive of Location-Based Attractions:

- Develop and operate with understanding and respect for the cultures of your guests and staff.
- Don't impose your culture, values and customs on them.

Rather:

- First thoroughly research their culture, including its norms and values and how they deal with the universal dilemmas;
- Determine how their culture will relate to the project and how all, or aspects of, the project might be in conflict with their culture; and
- Then design the physical facility and operations so they will reflect and reinforce the culture and identity of your staff and guests.

Cultural competence is not only the morally right approach to design and operation of an informal learning project, but the one that will maximize its success.

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