



YMCA YOUTH EXCHANGES CANADA

Module 4 – Culture Shock and Cultural Competency



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Workbook for YMCA Exchange Leaders

Module 4 – Culture Shock and Cultural Competency

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Culture Shock and Cultural Competency

Exploring Culture

With your group

No two people are the same, and cultural differences exist in virtually all groups. Your group should become more aware of differences within it even before they explore the differences between the two groups.

Your group can discuss topics such as expectations about touching, hugging, direct eye contact or differences in religious beliefs, food, or communications methods. It is a good idea to create safe space with your group early in the process so that everyone feels comfortable and participates.

With your twin

One benefit of the exchange is the bonds that develop between the members of your group and their “twins.” For this to happen, participants need to recognize there may be differences. Be prepared to understand them and to be patient, respectful and prepared to resolve conflicts if they arise. Participants need to feel comfortable working across language and cultural differences.

See the example activities at the end of this document for ideas on exploring differences within your own group, exploring intercultural issues, and exploring questions or concerns about the exchange.

Pre-exchange components to prepare youth and explore culture:

- Building your group
- Establishing safe norms in the group and behavioural expectations
- Learning about your own community and twin community
- Twinning the youth and getting to know your twin

You can find more information about these components in Part 1 and Part 2 of the workbook.

Culture Shock

Culture shock is the feeling of disorientation experienced by someone who is suddenly immersed in an unfamiliar culture, way of life, or set of attitudes. Group leaders, youth, and parents may experience culture shock during the exchange. As such, it is important to be aware and prepare for how to cope with culture shock during the exchange.

Stages of Culture Shock:

1. **The honeymoon stage:** Initial excitement of arriving in a new place with many differences. As with many new experiences, there is a sense of euphoria upon arrival. Generally, people feel excited, stimulated, and enriched.
2. **The distress stage:** Experiences no longer feel new and exciting. People may feel confused, isolated, angry, and homesick in this stage.
3. **Emergence stage:** This is the stage of acceptance. People begin to feel like themselves again and start to accept their new environment and the culture around them.

Symptoms of culture shock range from physical to emotional. They may include:

- Headaches
- Difficulty sleeping or insomnia
- Loss of appetite
- Irritability and anger over minor frustrations
- Homesickness
- A feeling of sadness, loneliness, and vulnerability
- Feeling shy or insecure
- Feeling lost or confused

Strategies to Help Youth Prepare and Cope with Culture Shock

Prepare

One of the most effective strategies to mitigate culture shock is to prepare oneself. The more you know about what to expect, the more comfortable you will be.

Watch, look, listen

Make full use of observation skills. Look for patterns in behaviour, keeping in mind that everyone is an individual and it can be easy to misinterpret a pattern. Be careful about generalizing, both positive and negative. Use “I” statements, like “I have observed...” or “I feel that...” instead of “They do ...” or “We all like...”

Try things out

Ask questions. Learn some new vocabulary. Build friendships. Have fun! Know that you’ll make mistakes—and that’s fine.

Notice reactions—yours and theirs

Keep a journal. Write a letter. Don’t worry about “understanding” everything. It doesn’t have to make sense but you still have to respect it.

Find a “comfort zone”

Do an activity that is comfortable and familiar once a day. Talk about your reactions with other group members. Write in your journal.

Have a buddy

Have a predetermined buddy who you feel comfortable going to when you are feeling homesick or overwhelmed.

Adapted from G. Ball, YMCA Geneva Park Centre

Cultural Competency

Cultural competence is defined as the ability of individuals and systems to work or respond effectively across cultures in a way that acknowledges and respects the culture of the person or organization being served. Culturally competent youth workers and teachers are aware and respectful of the values, beliefs, traditions, customs, and parenting styles of people they work with.

Here are ways to develop cultural competence with youth:

Self-awareness

- Learn about your own culture and history, spend some time examining your own values and assumptions, and how this may affect your relationship with youth from both groups.
- Be open to being challenged by the youth and other leaders.

Get to know the youth

- Learn about the youth in your group and your twin group.
- Support exploration of and pride in cultural identity among youth and seek to understand them through their own self-definitions.
- Engage youth in conversations about how they see themselves and their place in the world.
- Establish mentoring relationships between adults and youth.

Team building

- Encouraging youth to work together is an effective way to ensure the development of inter-cultural relationships.
- By involving youth in projects that demand collaboration across cultures, they will not only learn to work as a team with those who are different from themselves, but they will also experience success in aiding their communities.

Include a diversity of stakeholders

- Include leaders, volunteers, and practitioners from a variety of backgrounds in programming.
- Invite diverse speakers and visitors from the community. Host events that celebrate diversity and highlight specific cultures.



Model willingness

- Acknowledge differences and create safe spaces for open dialogue. Diversity, discrimination, and discomfort should not be taboo topics in educational settings.
- Model willingness to participate in traditions and discuss ideas that are different from yours.
- Adapt and cope with the stresses of culture shock and support youth in doing the same.

YMCA Cultural Competency Self-Assessment Tool

The knowledge you have of yourself and others is important and reflected in the ways you communicate and interact. This assessment should assist you in reflecting on your level of cultural competency. This tool is only for you. No one needs to see it. Be honest.

Rate yourself – Use a scale from 1 to 5 (1- never; 2-seldom; 3-sometimes; 4-most of the time; 5- always)

I reflect on my own cultural background, biases and prejudices on different dimensions of diversity (*) that may influence my behaviour.

1 2 3 4 5

I look at my own attitudes and behaviour to determine how I am processing information and delivering programming to diverse youth.

1 2 3 4 5

I educate myself about the culture and experience of diverse groups (for example, ethnic, LGBTT2SIQQA, gender and disability) by attending classes, workshops, cultural events, reading, interacting, etc.

1 2 3 4 5

I intervene, in an appropriate manner, when I observe others engaging in behavior that appear culturally insensitive or reflect prejudice.

1 2 3 4 5

I avoid stereotyping and generalizing about individuals and groups based on their diversity of dimensions (*) and other diverse factors.

1 2 3 4 5

I believe that all youth are capable of succeeding, regardless of their dimension (*)

1 2 3 4 5

I am willing to adapt and incorporate others' opinions and insights in order to create an inclusive environment, which better serves diverse youth.

1 2 3 4 5



I am willing to initiate changes which will better serve youth from diverse cultures.

1 2 3 4 5

Self-Awareness Rating

32 to 40 points:

You have given thought to and are actively involved in talking about and addressing some of these issues. What actions will you take tomorrow as a champion of cultural competence?

19 to 26 points:

Your honesty with yourself is an asset. Think about the areas that you have not thought about before. What insights do they help you discover? Now try talking about and addressing these insights with people who are different from you.

10 points or less:

Give yourself some time for introspection. You may find that it is easier to first talk this over with someone whose background is similar to yours. Without meaning to harm others, you may be unconsciously perpetuating culturally biased behaviors

**Dimensions of diversity: the unique personal characteristics that distinguish us as individuals and groups. These include but are not limited to: age, sex, gender, gender identity, race, ethnicity, physical and intellectual ability, class, creed, religion, sexual orientation, educational background and expertise.*

Example Activities

Crossing the Line

Objectives: To understand there are differences between people in the group, to discuss ways to create a safe environment and deal with differences, and to discuss discrimination

Supplies: Rope that draws a line down the middle of the room, list of categories that you have reviewed before the activity

1. Explain the rules:

- There is no speaking (other than the facilitator).
- No one has to move if they do not want to.
- You may not question another person's choice to cross or not cross the line at any time, during or after the game.
- There are no observers. If you are in the room, you must participate (with the exception of the facilitator)
- Ask if they are willing to agree to conduct the game in silence.

2. Set up the game.

Tell them the rope is a line drawn down the middle of the room. Ask everyone to stand on the same side of the rope. Say, I'm going to call out a category and ask you to cross the line if you feel the category applies to you. When you cross the line, turn to face those on the opposite side. Stay there until I ask you to return.

3. Wait for a minute, and then ask the group that crossed to return.

Give the next "cross the line" category. Categories begin as general and non-controversial, (e.g., "cross the line if you like ice cream") and then increasingly deal with areas of discrimination, personal experience, identity, etc. (e.g., "cross the line if you are a person of colour, have a disability, have ever experienced discrimination, are comfortable with your body, etc.).

4. Reflection

- How did it feel to cross the line?
- How did it feel to stand on the side of the majority? minority?
- Did you make eye contact with people on the other side? Did you feel comfortable looking at them? Do you ever get the feeling that people were surprised or shocked? What does this activity simulate?
- What does your experience in the game mean to you? What from this game is reflected in life?

- How would you want to be respected and supported on the program as a member of the minority?
- What can you do to support and respect differences as a member of the majority?

5. Divide into small groups and ask them to create a list of ways that they can support and respect differences. Ask them also to create a list of things they can offer and things they need to create an inclusive and safe environment.

Acknowledge to the group that it was an intense and challenging session (and that it is what the program is all about). Let them know that if anyone would like to talk about it further, you will be available to talk about it individually.

Sample categories

Cross the line... if you like ice cream.

Cross the line... if you enjoy rap music.

Cross the line... if you are a smoker.

Cross the line... if you are left-handed.

Cross the line... if you feel comfortable walking home at night.

Cross the line... if your family has more than one TV set.

Cross the line... if both your grandparents are living.

Cross the line... if your family has more than one car.

Cross the line... if your family has domestic help in the home, a cleaning person, a maid, nanny, etc.

Cross the line... if you are an only child (have no brothers or sisters).

Cross the line... if you have attended a private school.

Cross the line... if you have ever been on a family holiday out of the country.

Cross the line... if you are comfortable with your body.

Cross the line... if your parents are divorced.

Cross the line... if your parents are immigrants or refugees.

Cross the line... if you love and respect every member of your immediate family.

Cross the line... if you consider yourself a spiritual person.

Cross the line... if you believe in God.

Cross the line... if you have ever been arrested.

Cross the line... if you or a family member has a disability.

Cross the line... if you are a person of colour.

Cross the line... if you have experienced discrimination.

Cross the line... if you, a friend or family member has experienced sexual abuse.

Cross the line... if you have a friend or family member who is gay, lesbian or bisexual.

Cross the line... if you believe men and women are treated equally.

Adapted from the CUSO Working Across Difference Manual

The Intercultural Notebook

Objective: To understand the impact of culture in everyday contexts, analyze intercultural situations, and develop resolutions and insights about intercultural issues.

Supplies: Notebooks (1 per participant or small group), pens, access to internet

This activity could be done with your group in the pre-exchange phase to develop cultural competency before the exchange.

This notebook asks youth to begin collecting material from the Internet and other media that illustrates cultural differences. One primary benefit of this notebook is that youth start viewing the world through intercultural eyes.

Task:

Ask youth to collect eight intercultural incidents from the internet or clippings from magazines or newspapers. The clippings you collect should provide an opportunity to analyze situations such as:

- Cultural differences
- Misunderstandings that have occurred as a result of different world views
- Stereotypes that have caused serious consequences
- Conflicts that could be resolved through intercultural skills
- Creative uses of cultural differences to enhance a particular context or situation
- Communication style differences that have affected a situation
- Patterns of acculturation or culture shock

Ask youth to include a copy of the internet material, article or clipping, with the relevant sections highlighted.

Youth should include a title of the topic they will be discussing (e.g., race) followed by a complete definition of the topic.

They should mention the culture that the article is about and its importance to the topic.

Youth will then discuss what the clipping has to do with the topic, without retelling what is in the article.

Developing Cultural Competency

Objectives: To develop critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills, and to discuss questions or concerns about the exchange and cultural differences.

Supplies: Index cards (4 per participant), letter envelopes (1 each)

Method:

Pass out blank envelope and 4 index cards to each person. Form groups of five. The groups should be of equal size.

Say, "On the front of the envelope, write a question or pose a problem that concerns you about the family you're staying with or the twin community you are about to visit".

Instruct them to pass the envelopes to the right. Say, "Read the envelope, write an answer or solution on an index card, and insert the card in the envelope."

Instruct them to pass envelopes to the right again and without looking at the card in the envelope, repeat the process of reading the question and writing their suggestions.

Continue the process for several turns.

When each person gets his or her own envelope back, they can begin reviewing the contents. Ask them to read and prioritize the cards. Ask them to take turns sharing favorite responses, adding new thoughts, posing additional questions.