

Cross-Cultural Communication Skills Workshop
University of Washington ISchool ~ iWorld event notes
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Elisabeth Mitchell is the current Director of Leadership Initiatives and Population Leadership Program and the HHH Fellows Program at the Evans School of Public Affairs. She has a background in teaching English as a Second Language.

She presented a framework for culture with three levels: sensory, conscious rules, and unconscious rules. The sensory level is the most obvious. On this level, you notice sensory information such as sights, smells, and sounds that make you aware you are in a different culture than your own when you step off a plane. This sensory information is predictable and you can find out about it beforehand if you do research.

The second level of culture is the conscious rules. Different cultures may have different rules, but so do different workplaces. You do not necessarily need to leave the country to come into contact with a difference in culture. Conscious rules include those surrounding dress, personal space, greetings, eye contact, and eating. More often than not, you learn conscious rules when you break them. Mitchell noted that it is amazing how little the rule can be, but how strong a reaction is provoked when broken.

If you become too uncomfortable by a broken rule, it can affect communication. At this point, you must decide whether to say something. If so, what do you say? Self-referencing can help by simply explaining that you are not used to whatever is making you uncomfortable since in your culture it's done differently. This can open up the conversation about cultural differences and promote learning for both you and your interlocutor. It is also good to have a range of responses at your disposal so that you can target your response according to the situation and person.

Additionally, conscious rules include many rules around age and gender, punctuality, and formality. And although they are labeled "conscious rules" we often don't think about since they feel natural. There are books on these types of rules, although they can be harder to find as there is no authoritative source.

The third level of culture is the unconscious rules, or underlying values. When answering what makes a good mother or good librarian, the values you hold come through. Different cultures value time differently. In English we say we spend/save/make time in a very controlling way. This is different in other languages and cultures. Values are held deeply and often unknowingly so sometimes they can be hard to determine in a different culture. It is also hard to be flexible with one's values so it is important to understand your own.

Mitchell also presented a framework for problem solving as in if you're having a strong reaction to something. The framework has three steps: Describe, Interpret, and Evaluate. However, it's a human reaction to evaluate first and this usually happens in a split second. So perhaps it's more accurate to present the steps in this way: Evaluate, Describe, Interpret, and Re-evaluate. It is useful to have a friend to talk through your experience. Mitchell suggested you listen to yourself as you speak to be aware of evaluative language. Do not censor yourself, but be aware of your own value judgments. With your friend, come up with other possible interpretations. This can be hard since you have already interpreted it one way and seeing it a different way is challenging. Once you've brainstormed some other interpretations, re-evaluate your initial reaction and ask yourself what should have you done?

To illustrate this, she proposed a scenario of a library patron signing up to use a computer at 3pm. Another patron is still at the computer at 3:08pm and you are asked to intervene. What are some possible reasons for the patron to be still on the computer 8 minutes past his time? As a group, we brainstormed: he was a jerk, the person before him was late, he is unaware of the rules, he's completing a job application online and can't sign out until finished, he has an emergency situation to take care of. Thinking of all these possibilities will allow you to approach the patron in a more open way than just assuming he's a jerk.

Mitchell encouraged us to say that you don't know the rules when you don't and this can open up a conversation about the rules and allow for learning. Maybe people may be hesitant to do this, but then there is no exchange. When organizing formal meetings with people from different cultures it's also worth going over rules before starting so everyone is on the same page. Explaining *why* the rules are there is valuable to make others understand, even if they do not agree with them. Mitchell reminded us not to minimize the role we can play by modeling cross-cultural competence.