AN INQUIRY INTO CROSS-CULTURAL CREATIVITY TRAINING: RESULTS FROM A FIVE-WEEK STUDY TOUR IN BERGEN AND BRATISLAVA

Scott G. Isaksen
K. Brian Dorval

Center for Studies in Creativity
Buffalo State College & The Creative Problem Solving Group.

The purpose of this paper is to summarize the rationale, methodology, implications and outcomes from a five-week European study tour designed to identify similarities and differences relevant to creative problem-solving training in two different cultural contexts. The training used for comparison was derived from the Buffalo-based public training program on Creative Problem Solving (CPS). It is important to note that this article is designed to report the results of an exploratory approach into the study of the challenge of cross-cultural creativity training. The article will focus on providing key findings and implications for those interested in understanding and enhancing the effectiveness of cross-cultural creativity training. For those readers interested in a more extensive presentation of quantitative data on the cultural groups, please contact the authors.

RATIONALE: WHAT WAS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY TOUR?

Creativity is a global issue. Much of the early deliberate research and development in the field of creativity and innovation has occurred within the United States. The international and cross-cultural interest in both creativity and innovation has spread widely, however, resulting in the establishment of many centers, conferences, journals and professionals all over the world (Isaksen, 1987). This expanding interest in creativity and innovation on an international level was one of the main reasons for embarking on this study tour.

There were a few additional reasons for the importance of this undertaking. First, the Center for Studies in Creativity (CSC) has hosted many visiting scholars from around the world. We have an active visiting professorship program and respond to dozens of visits each year from international scholars. It has been from these scholars and later visitations to international conferences that we have realized the importance of staying connected to researchers and practitioners from a variety of cultures. Our own experiences with creativity training were primarily limited to the North American culture. We sought to extend our understanding of creativity and innovation as global issues.

Second, many of the discussions which occurred during the 1990 International Creativity Research and Networking Conferences (hosted by the CSC), the issue was raised regarding understanding which elements of creativity were located primarily within the individual and which aspects resided in the culture or context. This was an issue in that those aspects located within the individual may be relevant across many different cultures or contexts while those aspects residing more in the cultural context and may vary considerably from place to place. Creativity and innovation professionals might find the distinctions between personal and cultural factors affecting creativity of common interest. Those aspects located within the culture may create the need to modify the approach or content of creativity research and training and can also be useful in understanding cultural diversity. Aside from looking for cultural differences, it might also be useful to examine similarities across cultures as well.

Third, the percentage of organizations which operate across national boundaries is rapidly increasing. We have been involved with the direct provision of CPS training to a variety of these organizations over the last five years. From our experiences, we find many program participants curious about the cross-cultural application of the techniques and methodology as well as the instrumentation and assessment used in these training programs.

Unfortunately, there is a paucity of empirical research and inquiry on cross-cultural implications of creativity training that practitioners can read to help them plan and deliver more effective cross-cultural CPS training. Some initial attempts have been made to understand the impact of culture on creativity training (i.e., DeCook, 1991). However, we did not feel that the issues surrounding cross-cultural CPS training had been well-defined or explained. Therefore, this study tour represented an initial attempt to identify possible issues for further exploration and study. It took a more scientific approach by: identifying specific questions to be addressed, using a consistent, research-based training program balanced with theoretical foundation and practical application on which to gather data, and triangulating results from three different cultures.

As a result of these circumstances and experiences, the Center for Studies in Creativity embarked on a five-week European study tour to obtain some international perspectives and to primarily address the following questions:

> What might be some of the similarities and differences we could observe while delivering a two-day program on Creative Problem Solving (CPS) in two different cultures?
>
> What basic CPS skill-base might exist cross-culturally upon which to examine the individual's strengths and learning needs?
>
> What modifications might need to be made to our current approach to CPS in order to fit different cultural contexts? and
>
> How are other creativity professionals dealing with issues of creativity and innovation; and what do they consider some of their future critical issues?

METHODOLOGY: WHAT HAPPENED DURING THE TOUR?

Most of our time was spent with two groups. The first group consisted of 13 professionals from the faculty of the University of Bergen's Cognitive Unit, Bergen, Norway, and an associated local organization. These individuals included a psychiatrist, a textile artist, and cognitive psychologists. The second group consisted of 13 scientists from the Slovak Academy of Science's Institute of Creativity, Bratislava, Czecho-slovakia. The scientists came from the disciplines of anthropology, visual arts, clinical psychology, educational psychology, engineering, invention, linguistics, mathematics, philosophy and psychology.

During our 35-day trip, we visited six cities in five countries, and made contact with well over 200 individuals. We held numerous meetings and discussions, made entries in our logs and shared our own thoughts and reactions with each other on a daily basis.

We delivered a two-day training program with each of these groups. The design for both programs followed (as closely as possible) the standard Center for Studies in Creativity public program design developed on the basis of forty years of research and development. The program focused primarily on providing training in the components, stages and techniques of CPS. As part of the training, subjects were administered the Kirton Adaption-Innovation Inventory (Kirton, 1976) and the Climate for Creativity Questionnaire (Isaksen, 1989).

To maximize our learnings, we identified and prepared a team of participant-observers for each program who would meet with the training team and participate in a post-program debriefing meeting. The post-program meetings were designed specifically to improve our understanding of some of the cross-cultural implications of creativity training. The agenda for these meetings

included: discussion regarding program design modifications necessary to help the two-day program fit better in the culture; and identifying their perceptions about cross-cultural similarities and differences. The two-hour debriefing meeting after the Bergen program included a psychiatrist, a textile artist, and two cognitive psychologists. In Bratislava, the entire group was involved in the four-hour post-program meeting.

RESULTS: KEY SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

The many meetings and discussions held during the tour provided additional breadth to the information generated as a result of our experiences in the two programs. After reviewing our notes, our own analysis, and the extensive data from these two meetings, we compiled the following similarities and differences. These are general and initial observations rather than extensively documented or empirically validated outcomes. Our hope is that they will provide some raw material for future inquiry and investigation.

Similarities

We discovered many similarities in the way participants from Bergen and Bratislava responded to our two-day CPS program. The following thirteen similarities appeared to be consistent across the programs we offered in Bergen, Bratislava and Buffalo. They are not presented in order of importance and some may be inter-related.

Dynamic balance was seen as important. The basic guidelines for generating options as well as analyzing developing and refining options were useful and valuable for all participants. Participants were generally familiar with the "rules for brainstorming," but benefited from their explicit training and practice. Although participants were familiar with the brainstorming technique, they were able to improve their application of the guidelines with guided practice. The guidelines for analyzing, developing and refining options (convergent thinking) were seen as helpful and complementary to those for generating options. Reaching for a productive and dynamic balance between the two kinds of thinking was generally seen as important.

Current view of CPS seen as valuable. The current descriptive design of CPS as three components and six stages was seen as productive for all participants in both programs. All had previous experiences with the Generating Ideas component, but relatively little previous exposure to the Understanding the Problem and Planning for Action components. At first, there was a little surprise that a creativity-oriented process would include an emphasis on situation analysis and problem definition, as well as solution development and implementation planning. Once participants had the opportunity to experience the components on real challenges, utilizing the three components made sense. Feedback from both programs indicated that participants found CPS to be a flexible process which provided a natural approach for improving and strengthening their problem-solving efforts. In particular, the non-prescriptive nature of the current version of CPS provided for increased breadth of application. Those familiar with previous, more prescriptive versions of CPS asserted that they often found them to appear rigidly step-by-step and confining. In addition, the increased flexibility of application for the newer approach to CPS created the need for better comprehension of the techniques and their appropriate utilization.

"Front end" of CPS seen as useful. Ownership was seen as a valuable concept in determining the appropriate use of CPS. Using the elements of client interest, influence and need for imagination as screens for the application of CPS seemed to be a valuable approach. The deliberate emphasis on exploring personal orientation and outlook promoted an integration between the context and person. The explicit techniques and methodologies contained in the "front end" of

CPS appeared to promote a metacognitive approach to the application of the many techniques within the three components.

The level-style distinction seen as relevant. The distinction between level of creative ability and style of creativity was seen as a relevant and important issue for all participants. The Kirton Adaption-Innovation Inventory (KAI) feedback provided during the program was seen as useful in approaching personal orientation to CPS. The general assertion that a preference for a style or manner of creativity and decision making is distinct from the level or capacity of performance was seen as a potentially productive approach to helping people connect to the concept of creativity. Aiming the training program at understanding and appreciating style differences while learning tools and techniques was seen as helpful.

There was consensus about a positive outlook on creativity. Despite the different cultural contexts, very strong evidence was found for a positive outlook regarding creativity and its development. All participants acknowledged the value of taking deliberate time to learn about creativity rather than seeing creativity as a magical ability reserved for a gifted few. Both groups acknowledged that some of their cultural mythology was debunked by the program.

Deliberate and explicit approach to CPS seen as useful. Participants found deliberate stages and techniques which were trainable and learnable, as very empowering. The ability to make the creative process repeatable, logical and communicable was an intriguing learning for all participants. The use of professionally-prepared graphics and materials (program manual) was seen as very useful. The participants enjoyed the high-level of professional preparation by the trainers. In general, most of the participants described the natural state of affairs for their groups as having the process aspects of interacting and operating remain...g somewhat invisible. Being able to openly and explicitly decide what the group was going to do from a process perspective was seen as beneficial and important.

Learning climate influenced creativity. A friendly training environment was observed as a real benefit to learning and applying CPS. Participants found the concept of climate for creativity and our current assessment approach as interesting and useful. In particular, they were able to use the Creative Climate Questionnaire (CCQ) data presented during the program in helping them build plans of action for the personal challenges they worked on during the program.

Value seen in an experiential approach. A training design which provided for an enriching array of personal learnings, coupled with the ability to apply those learnings on real challenges was very productive. The model for learning and applying CPS was validated; moving from out-of-context into real challenges with some intermediary practice in applying selected techniques was seen as helpful in preparing participants for transfer of training. The experiential approach to the training provided a good mix of personal and professional challenges. Active involvement in learning and applying the process techniques and practicing the application of the CPS components was seen as personally meaningful.

Research-based program seen as worthwhile. The assessments we used (KAI and CCQ) reported relatively similar findings in all the programs. Aside from the quantitative similarities, participants reported consistent qualitative findings related to learning and applying CPS. For example, innovators on the KAI preferred learning and applying divergent thinking and associated techniques, while adaptors preferred convergent thinking and its corresponding techniques. Having a continuous connection to research on effects of CPS training increased interest in cross-cultural comparisons. Being able to bring to bear the historical and psychological basis for the program methodology was seen as valuable and interesting. These issues promoted much discussion. Participants appreciated the research base of the two-day program as well.

Favorable response to team-based approach to training. Although both trainers were viewed as quite different, the teaming approach to training was identified as a real strength. The

interaction with participants was very helpful. They were able to select a trainer that was more amenable to their particular style. Most participants were able to identify with at least one of member of the training team. As a result, the team was better able to "reach" a wider diversity of participants.

Process seen as helpful in promoting interaction. A common benefit of the current view of CPS perceived in both groups was the effect of helping groups develop a common understanding for problem-solving activity. The guidelines for divergent and convergent thinking provided a clear set of suggestions for group interaction and specified an appropriate set of social norms for two very different kinds of mental activity. The application of these guidelines reduced the friction and wasted time for meetings. Having a commonly-shared language and set of behaviors which match the words was seen as helpful.

Creativity professionals balance for-profit and not-for-profit activity. Most of the creativity professionals we met were working in at least two worlds. They were bridging a not-for-profit research and development area of operation with an entrepreneurial form of consulting. Most had a connection to a university, foundation, institute or center, as well as to a commercial application of their creativity strengths. These strengths ranged from work in the arts to industrial consulting. Often, resources brought in through work with for-profit organizations were used to fund not-for-profit activities.

Personal approach to understanding and applying creativity seen as helpful. In all the cultures examined, all four conceptual categories associated with the creativity literature (i.e., person, product, process and press) were described in the participants' definitions of creativity. Definitions of creativity were not limited to work or home, nor were they limited to special case or genius levels of human performance. All groups were able to share their definitions with others in their respective group. A good diversity of productive approaches to creativity was observed.

Differences

Generally, it was interesting to note that we could identify so many essential similarities. The themes identified above were observed in the Bergen, Bratislava and Buffalo groups. Despite these similarities, there were some fundamental cultural differences observed. The following six differences were identified.

Language differences may be challenging. It took more energy and time to develop a common understanding of some of the concepts we examined due to language differences. Learning the specialized vocabulary around CPS and creativity was a challenge. However, translation of materials was helpful to the participants when it was accomplished. Having a few members of the group who were fluent in both English and their native language was also extremely helpful.

Program preparation may take more time. It took more time and energy to prepare the participants for the training. The experiential nature of the training, which required more thoughtful preparation on the part of all involved, was a challenge, especially due to the language differences. The specialized nature of the programs' logistics, including the translation of key materials, was time consuming and more challenging due to the geographical separation prior to the program.

Sense of time and energy level differed. There were observable differences in the amount of time normally reserved for a "working day." Other high-priority commitments, especially the family, created different levels of energy and time available for the training. Concepts regarding how much learning activity might be accomplished within certain time constraints also different.

Level of emotional involvement in interaction varied. There were striking differences in the level of emotion shown during the learning and applying of CPS. One culture seemed to provide

for a higher degree of expression of emotion during learning and interaction, while the other culture appeared more reserved and "cool." These differences had an effect on the degree and kind of personal interaction among participants during and after the program.

Social role differences appeared. There were observable differences in the expectations participants held for the leadership roles within the groups. In each case, there were differences in formal organizational level within the groups. Participants interacted differently with those in positions of authority, especially with those to whom they reported. In addition, there were differences in the male-female interaction of the participants; the difference most noticeable was in the level of assertiveness-submissiveness evidenced on the part of female participants. Other social norms which may be different included: emphasis on competition-cooperation and level of playfulness permitted during learning.

Varying levels of cognitive emphasis observed. The level of emphasis on the cognitive aspects of CPS was also different. Both the Bergen and Bratislava group had a deeper concern for the personal aspects of creativity and pushed beyond the relatively strong and rather traditional cognitive focus to the training then Buffalo groups. There were concerns about the whole person (including the physical/biological/kinesthetic and emotional/affective) in Bergen and a stronger emphasis on emotion in Bratislava.

There were noticeable differences beyond those identified. For example, the general socioeconomic level differences in cultures will have corresponding effects on the receptivity of creativity training as well as the level of achievement motivation. Different cultures may require different illustrations to be used during training to communicate the concepts and techniques.

Key Learnings and Implications for Cross-Cultural Creativity Training

Many issues and implications were identified which will impact understanding and training of creativity in different cultures. The issues identified below will be important to consider for those working within different cultures, as well as different subcultures within a larger culture. For example, these issues may be important to consider when working with different organizations within the same culture or the same organizations within a different culture.

Provide prework and preparation. Participants from different cultures and subcultures may have different experiences and expectations for training in CPS. In order to maximize the learning experience it is important to help participants prepare for the training. To increase their general level of "readiness", it is be helpful to make sure a match exists between what participants expect from the training experience and the goals and objectives of the training itself. Therefore, participants' expectations of the training, as well as the trainers' expectations of the participants should be made explicit. Informing participants of the goals and objectives of the training, what will happen during the experience, and how their preparation and prework will be used can be very helpful in increasing their readiness for the training. Providing a meaningful and complete picture of the future learning experience will be helpful for the participants as well as the hosts concerned with logistical responsibilities.

Carefully position assessment and testing. Individuals from different cultures may have different experiences with the use of tests and assessments. From our experience, both positive support and suspicion toward the use of tests and measures is present. It is important to position the use of assessment in the support of CPS training by taking deliberate and explicit action to explain the purpose, use and outcome of each test or assessment. It is also helpful to follow standard guidelines for ethical use of psychological assessment. Ensuring such things as confidentiality of personal data, informed consent and voluntary participation will be helpful to using assessments in different cultures.

Build a common language. One of the most influential differences found between cultures was language. Special care and effort must be taken to assist participants in understanding basic language around the content of the training program. It should not be assumed that people know specialized language used during training. In particular, different cultures may have certain words which do not translate or translate with slightly different meaning. Participants should be provided with the opportunity to develop a basic understanding of the terminology and concepts while maintaining sensitivity to the unique cultural variations inherent in language. Also, using pictures or graphics to convey complex meaning can be very helpful in overcoming language barriers.

Become aware of cultural norms. It is important to understand the impact that cultural norms will have on CPS training. Different cultures may have different attitudes and beliefs which may impact the design of a program on such issues as the kinds of activities you provide, the information share or the stories you tell. For example, social roles, perception of leadership and gender may impact the type of interaction participants engage in during a program. Work ethics may influence the amount and kind of energy participants will spend during the program. This will effect logistical issues such as the length of the training, breaks, lunch scheduling, etc. Becoming aware of cultural norms will assist in the design planning and delivery of the program as well as preparation of logistics.

Have a vision for training. When training in a culture in which there may be unfamiliarity or ambiguity, the likelihood of unexpected challenges increases. Having a clear vision for the training can increase the readiness to turn unexpected, emergent "surprises" into opportunities which increase the productivity and specialization of the training. A clear vision allows focus on the desired outcome of the training and helps reduce dependency on the "means" of the training. As a result, there is increased flexibility to deal with cultural challenges which may arise.

Use a cross-cultural planning team. In order to effectively modify a training experience to meet the specific needs of a culture, it is helpful to use a cross-cultural planning team. This team should use its diversity of perspective (inside and outside the culture) to plan, deliver and debrief the training. This diversity will help keep the training honest in providing a beneficial learning experience, as well as ensure a design and approach to training which is appropriate to the culture. It would be suggested that this planning team meet with the clients prior to the program to get their input on tailoring the design for the culture.

Use a validated training program. It was helpful to use a program which has had a long history of use, a tradition of application in a wide variety of contexts and a useful body of literature which supports its validity. A program having a substantial amount of research and practical support is more likely to have the necessary number of qualified professionals who "speak the same specialized language" and are familiar with the same methodology.

To better understand the cross-cultural impact of a training program we found it helpful to be consistent with the design and training team. This consistency enabled the program design to be validated and systematically improved based on feedback from a variety of cultures. This validation will increase the effectiveness of the training as well as provide increased ability to respond to participants' diversity of questions from a variety of cultures.

Start with a search for similarities. As a result of our search for similarities and differences across cultures, we found some of the core constructs and principles of CPS to be supported. These fundamental "building blocks" for creativity training can be used as a starting place for developing and tailoring creativity training programs. They should also be examined further in the context of other cultures. In general, it appears productive, when bringing creativity training into other cultures, to initially focus on identifying and building on the similarities between the cultures before identifying key differences. Starting with the identification of common ground was a productive approach for understanding and appreciating cultural differences.

Know your participants. From a distance, the differences of the people in other cultures appeared abundant. However, the ability to visit their homes and interact with them on a social level provided a much clearer picture of the program participants. Knowing the participants personally may better able the needs of their special situation to be identified and understood. It may also help remove some of the barriers which might interfere with creativity training or cause unnecessary attention to differences.

Use a qualified and diverse training team. In order to respond to the widest variety of needs of the participants it is important to have a qualified and diverse training team. Members on the team will be able to balance each others strengths and weaknesses. During the training itself, participants may more naturally prefer one style of presentation over another. Debriefing after the program enabled us to gather a wider variety of feedback because different participants approached different members of the team. The diversity and quality of a team provided a more effective training experience for a diversity of people.

Many other issues were identified as a result of our study tour. The importance of the philosophical construct of integration was very helpful in keeping us open to possible additions, modifications and improvements to our current design and approach to CPS training. Balancing home and work lives provided an interesting cultural issue which will be useful to apply to our work with organizations within similar cultures. Finally, it became apparent that there are strong areas of conceptual relationships between creativity and leadership.

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

This study was a first attempt designed to open up the issue of cross-cultural differences in CPS training. There are many issues and questions which have been identified and which provide a number of future research and application possibilities.

It became apparent to us that those of us at Center for Studies in Creativity have a need to extend and improve our understanding of the skill-base underlying the effective and productive application of CPS. We believe, based on our experiences, that the basic guidelines and techniques "worked" cross-culturally and that it would be beneficial to deepen the understanding of the cognitive and personality-related factors associated with the learning and application of CPS. The instruments we typically used during training appeared to be useful in both programs and may offer some insight into future assessment approaches.

It is quite clear from the initial inquiry that there is a substantial amount to be learned from this kind of study. We must work together with our international colleagues to develop and sustain a global approach to understanding creativity and its many applications. Plans are underway to continue international research planning efforts as well as to future cross-cultural research aimed at understanding organizational and psychological climate for creativity in the work-place, differences in social roles (gender, leadership) and the management of the diversity of creativity styles and levels in different contexts.

Creativity is not only important as a national issue, effective understanding and improved application of this fundamental human resource is also at the heart of global survival.

REFERENCES

DeCook, C. (1991). The impact of creativity training programs. Unpublished Masters Thesis, Faculty of Business Administration, Manchester Business School, Manchester, England.

Isaksen, S. G. (1987). Introduction to Frontiers of creativity research. In S. G. Isaksen, (Ed.), *Frontiers of creativity research: Beyond the basics.* Buffalo NY: Bearly Limited.

Isaksen, S. G. (1989). *Creative problem solving: A process for creativity.* Unpublished training manual. Buffalo, NY: The Creative Problem Solving Group - Buffalo.

Kirton, M. J. (1976). Adaptors and innovators: A description and measure. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 61*, 622-629.

Authors Note: A previous version of this paper was originally prepared for presentation at the 1991 Center for Studies in Creativity Colloquium Series held at Buffalo State College on September 29, 1991. This study tour was sponsored in part by the Norwegian Marshall Fund, University of Bergen's Cognitive Unit, The Slovak Academy of Sciences' Institute of Creativity, and Buffalo State College's Center for Studies in Creativity.