



French Connections – A Cross Cultural Experience

Impact of culture on CPS facilitation

By Kate Stuart-Cox

Culture is defined as “the way of life of a particular society or group / the customs, civilisation and achievements of a particular time or people” (Oxford English Dictionary).

We are all part of a culture, inherit culture, and are influenced by culture. These influences may be subtle, hard to define, and buried deep in our consciousness. In this world made smaller by advanced communications, technology, and transport we appear on the surface to be united in many ways, to be part of a global economy; more reliant on each other than ever before, but our own culture still owns us. It is still difficult to understand the subtleties of, and adapt to the behaviour, attitudes, and traditions of other nations.

In an international company, cultural awareness and understanding at all levels within the organisation is vital for success.

French Connections

Despite our increasing awareness and appreciation of international food, tastes, and flavours. French cuisine continues to command the utmost respect and admiration around the world. Consequently, it was a challenge to be asked to help the French division of the company to generate ideas for new products in their cooking and entertaining unit.

The company operated in a fiercely competitive market place and the Cooking and Entertaining unit was especially vulnerable. The CPS-B team had been working closely with company directors to redirect the new product development strategy, emphasising the importance of addressing potential target markets and key consumer needs as early in the process as possible. Prior to this input, ideas had been put forward somewhat at random, and often, mistakenly, a supposedly good idea would be ‘shoe horned’ to fit development criteria, resulting in failure since neither the target market nor consumer need had been addressed.

It was my task to help this new process on a smaller scale by facilitating new product development sessions for my European colleagues. My client in this case was responsible for the French market and had already put market research in place to determine the markets and their key needs.

Six sessions were to take place over two days, and 2 or 3 ideas that could be further developed by her editorial team were required from each session. The client was eager to make the sessions interactive by bringing in external resource group members who were experts in the cooking field (for example a chef, a teacher, a cooking photographer, a home economist) but not directly associated with the company. Their external viewpoint, and fresh thinking would be stimulating for the other group members.

Speaking their language

The company's policy required that all employees work with English as their common language, providing a vehicle for efficient international communication. Previous experience in facilitation of mixed nationality groups had highlighted an interesting problem.

In international sessions, it was straightforward for people to follow the session introduction, and the problem background, but it was not easy for them to generate options in a foreign language. These mixed group sessions always included natural English speakers, and since they were obviously more active in the generation phases it was vital to prevent those to whom English was not their mother tongue from 'withdrawing' from the session through frustration. Although the facilitator could slow the pace and manage the group dynamics to enable the non-English speakers to contribute more easily, it was not enough to overcome the problem entirely.

Imagine the scene for a minute. You have an idea, but you must translate it into another language that you have learned but is not second nature to you. Some words don't translate well, some not at all, and you are using up precious creative energy trying to convey the meaning of your idea. Meanwhile all around you ideas are flowing rapidly, other group members have generated several ideas. Someone has even called out a similar idea to your own. So you leave it. Another idea comes to mind but the same problems occur. When you try and build on other ideas you're not sure if you've understood, so you leave those too. You are enthusiastic, open minded, have valuable input in the subject, and can think freely, but ten minutes have elapsed and you have not put forward one idea. How frustrated would you feel?

Someone who had experienced this dilemma once described it to me as 'becoming deaf' for an afternoon. You can see what is going on around you, you want to join in, you can read the language to a certain extent, people expect you to contribute, but you feel isolated and removed from the creative energy of the group.

I realised that if I was to help the client solve her problem and facilitate the sessions productively the 'French only' speakers had to be able to generate and focus in their own language. Short of casting a spell that would turn my basic 'school' French into fluency, I had to find help with translation.

As luck would have it, the French office employed a bi-lingual American Human Resources manager. His experience in the HR department meant that facilitation, and an understanding of group dynamics were natural to him and these attributes, plus his language skills, made him perfect for the role. I also called on a colleague who had completed the CPS-B 5-day course and had facilitation experience using his French language skills to help me with the volume of sessions we had to tackle.

Clients and Culture

As we all know, the task appraisal between client and facilitator is of vital importance for successful CPS facilitation. Failure to clarify a mutual understanding of the situation, objectives, and expectations results in a chaotic, and ineffectual session. This is a difficult stage of the process at the best of times, but brings up more problems when different cultures meet.

Despite early task appraisal meetings and written confirmation of session planning, objectives, and agendas I experienced certain misunderstandings with my client that materialised through my false assumption of their understanding. Do either of the following scenarios sound familiar?

You have just joined a group of colleagues in conversation, they are talking fast and you miss the gist of the conversation. You nod and join in as best you can at appropriate times, hoping you will pick up the full meaning later on. As far as your colleagues are concerned you are fully on board. You are in a conversation with colleagues where something new is being explained, you genuinely think you have understood, and have no reason to query anything that has been said. It is only later that you may discover your mistake. If this can happen easily in communication in your native tongue, imagine how it must be in a foreign language.

Since I only became aware of these misunderstandings the afternoon before the sessions, I had to make many last minute changes in planning, preparation, and logistics. For example, my client had assumed that an outcome of 2 or 3 product 'ideas' meant fully worked up concepts involving editorial detail – not the level one could normally produce on a Post-It note. The word 'idea' had been misinterpreted. I was anxious that we should not curtail the generation phase too

early and cut out time to stretch the thinking and produce both novelty and usefulness. We had to work together to come to a compromise that would ensure the CPS process could be productive, but allow more input than I had planned.

One Word, Many Interpretations

I mentioned earlier that a word in one language may not translate well into another – the meaning may be different. This problem arose during one of the six sessions addressing the need for a product based on the French word *convivialite*. There is an English word *conviviality* meaning sociability; fondness for good company, but it is somewhat old fashioned and rarely used. *Convivialite* in French has a different meaning, but it was extremely hard for my client to describe it to me in English.

I opened up this session by asking the resource group to draw ‘*convivialite*’ in pictures, asking them to describe feelings, places, things, that would be in their *convivial* world. Interestingly, they did not all agree with the client’s view, and there were some fundamental concerns among the group that a product based on *convivilaite* might appeal to a narrow market. From the drawings it was possible to see some common interpretations – creating a cosy, totally comfortable atmosphere; opulence; generosity and informality in the amount of food and wine provided; open ended length of stay for the many guests. There were also several differences, and entertaining on this scale was seen by some to represent a fantasy world not firmly based in current reality. More importantly, it was still impossible for them to summarise the meaning of *convivialite* in one clear phrase.

The drawing exercise had certainly succeeded in revealing discrepancies in opinion. But the client was keen to pursue it and we proceeded to generate ideas around the commonalities. It is interesting to note that out of the product ideas generated from the two days, those from this session were the least successful. This was especially apparent at the next stage of product development when the product concepts were assessed at an international conference to evaluate their potential in the global marketplace. The *convivialite* basis for the product became even harder to explain to an international audience with many contrasting cultures.

We may expect to encounter cultural differences when we go to a foreign country with a foreign language, but when I looked over some of the issues arising from my French trip, I concluded that cultural misunderstanding is not peculiar to a foreign culture. It can also occur between individuals and organisations in your own country where they speak the same language, but communication is weak. Facilitating across cultures highlighted the importance of a key requirement –

CPS facilitators “must be skilful communicators” (Isaksen & Dorval- Facilitating Creative Problem Solving).

How was it useful?

- *Working with a translator.* Use HR personnel if you need in house company translation – they are use to group facilitation, and generally intrigued or experienced in creative processes. Try and meet with your translator beforehand and conduct a task appraisal with them to discover whether your and their expectations in terms of input and output match. The more you can work together as a cohesive team the better. Make sure they know how much they are appreciated especially if they are giving up precious time to help you.
- *Check with the client more than you think is necessary* – check any changes the day before – objectives, roles, timing, agenda, number of group members, and logistics. A seemingly small change to them may impact greatly on your planning.
- *Be wary of making the assumption that the client has understood.* If he/she speaks another language – clarify with the client as much as possible. Use your intuition – they may feel they have understood perfectly!
- *Do not assume that the working hours, or the work ethics you are use to will be the same.* Check start, finish, and lunch break time expectations. You may expect the client to work late, they may expect to leave straightaway. An hour for lunch may not mean being able to start again after an hour. If lunch is an important part of a culture, it may mean an hour minimum for lunch itself, plus time for coffee and to wander back to the session location!
- *Allow extra time* in your planning, the translation issue can add many minutes. Even writing up problem statements in a different language takes more time. If working with another facilitator, but on concurrent sessions, ensure that you schedule in extra time to meet and get feedback. Client activities during breaks and lunch hours may consume more time than anticipated, leaving little time for you and your partner to compare notes and make improvements.
- *Use Wandering Brainwriting.* This appears to work extremely well as a tool for groups where there are external members who are completely new to the process and each other. They appear to value this quiet thinking time and it can give them more confidence in their contribution later on. Perhaps this is because it is more anonymous by nature and helps when people are shy about speaking out?
- *Be sensitive to the group atmosphere and adapt to fit cultural needs* .For example, be prepared to allow time for ‘discussion’, by this I mean opportunities for people to naturally vocalise, express themselves and their idea. Discussion is generally discouraged in CPS practice because it often

impedes the flow of new ideas and can be circular in nature – everyone is happy they've had their say, but no conclusions are reached and time is wasted. In some cultures this may seem a very unnatural constraint and can damage the open environment you are trying to create.