



Community Foundation Transatlantic Fellowship  
Orientation Session  
June 2-4, 2001 – Washington D.C.

**Intercultural Learning**  
**A few awareness tips for US and European Fellows**  
**& Host Community Foundations**

*By Luis Amorim*

You are about to embark on an exchange that will allow you not only to learn more about community foundations on the other side of the Atlantic, but also to learn more about another culture and in the process of doing so, about your own culture of origin. During your short stay abroad you will be exposed to other values, habits, rituals and living environments. Conversely, your hosts will also be exposed to your own values, habits, rituals and living conditions. Mutual learning will occur and the present text is an attempt at highlighting some of the underlying features of this learning, providing you with more insight to fully benefit from this experience, not only from a professional point of view but also on a personal level. Our aim is to raise your awareness to the process of intercultural learning and in this way to motivate you to reflect upon the relevance of this concept in relation to your participation in this Fellowship.

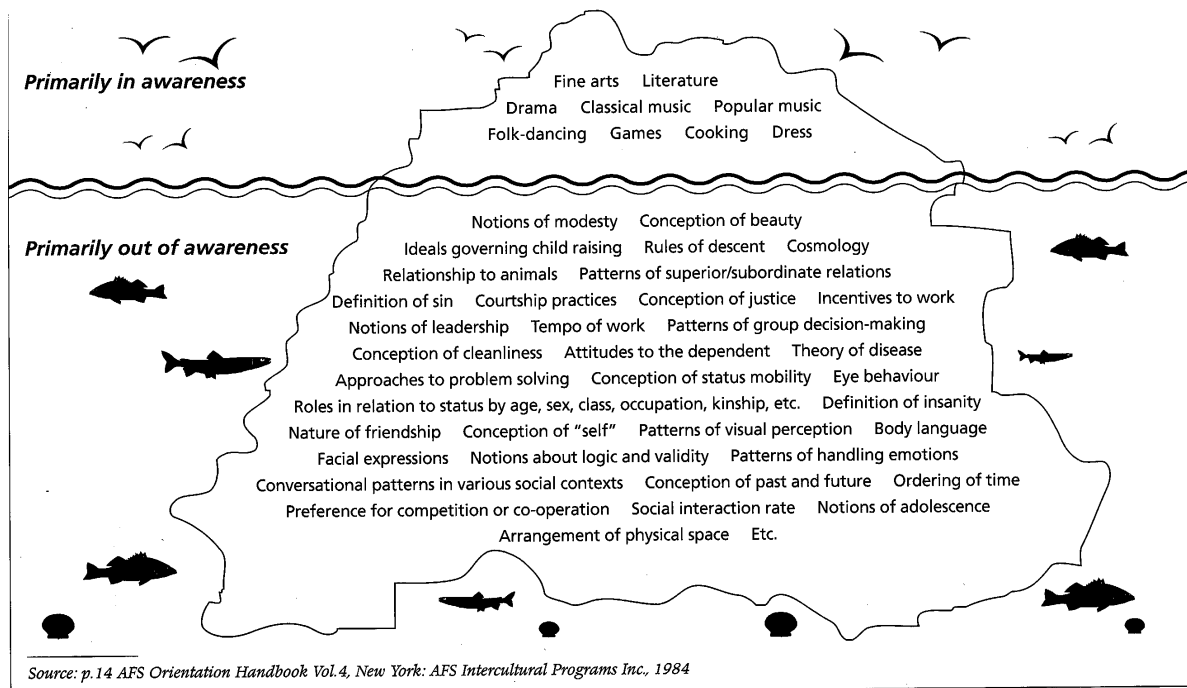
**Why a text on Intercultural Learning?**

In a professional environment we often tend to forget that communication, even when content-oriented, does not happen in a void of culture. In the case of the Fellowship participants will spend three weeks away from their families and relatives, co-workers and acquaintances. They will be confronted with new environments, new ways of looking at things, new working practices. One should not underestimate the role that cultural differences can play in promoting or hindering a learning process. Raising the fellows' awareness, but also that of the hosts, to see themselves as "cultural beings" will hopefully help them to be equipped with the senses to notice when cultural differences play an important role in a situation of exchange of knowledge and practice. In this way we hope that you will be able to use this intercultural sensitivity to build a better contact with your fellow or host community foundation and to get as much as possible out of this reciprocal experience.

## Looking at culture: the Iceberg Model

The idea behind this model is that culture can be pictured as an iceberg: only a very small portion of the iceberg is visible above the waterline. However, the tip of the iceberg is in fact supported by a much larger, although invisible, part underneath the waterline. This part of the iceberg is its foundation.

**Fig. 1: The iceberg concept of culture**



The same happens with culture, there are some visible parts: architecture, art, cooking, music, language, just to mention a few; but the powerful dimensions of culture are more difficult to spot: the social norms, the values, the basic assumptions about space and time, the relation with nature, the conception of justice and of "self", etc. The iceberg model of culture implies that the visible parts of culture are just expressions of its invisible parts. It also highlights the difficulty of understanding people from different cultural backgrounds because although we may see the visible parts of their "iceberg" we cannot immediately realise what the foundations are.

## Intercultural Learning

The term "intercultural learning" can be understood on different levels. On a more literal level it refers to an individual process of acquiring knowledge, attitudes or behaviour that is connected with the interaction of different cultures. However, intercultural learning can also be seen in a larger context to denote a concept of how people with different cultural backgrounds can live together peacefully, in community and in constant interaction. Learning in this context is understood less as an individual process but emphasises instead the open ended character of the process towards an intercultural society (beyond multiculturalism).

Intercultural learning demands that you know yourself and where you come from, before being able to understand others. It is a challenging process as it involves very deeply rooted ideas about what is good and bad, about how you structure your world and your life. In a process of intercultural learning, what we take for granted and feel is essential is put into question. Our identity is challenged by other people's ways of doing and thinking and this occurs not always without conflict. Developing intercultural sensitivity is a gradual process from denial to integration of differences.

## **Approaching intercultural learning: a question of attitude**

### *1) Confidence and Respect*

Building up confidence is important in order to achieve the openness necessary for a mutual learning process. One should feel comfortable to:

- Share different points of view;
- Share different feelings and perceptions,

to arrive at acceptance and understanding. It requires a lot of patience and sensitivity in order to create a learning atmosphere which enables us to listen to each other's opinions and feelings as equals and to promote self-confidence and mutual trust. In this sense, it is necessary to:

- Give space to everybody's expression;
- Value all experiences, talents and contributions;
- Discuss our needs and expectations openly.

### *2) Experiencing Identity*

The departure point for intercultural learning is your own culture, which means also your own personal background and experience. It is in them that you will encounter both the opportunities and the obstacles of this learning process. We all have a personal reality which has shaped us, and we will continue to live with that, enriched with new knowledge and experience. Trying to understand ourselves, our own identity, is a prerequisite to encounter others and engage in meaningful exchange.

### *3) Reality as a Construction*

There are many ways to read and discern reality. In a process of intercultural learning one becomes acutely aware of the way everyone constructs their own world. Even such basic dimensions such as time and space can be perceived in a dramatically different way from culture to culture. But still, we all live in one world and that affects our lives and relations with others. Your learning process should be guided by the following principles:

- Respect for personal freedom and decision;
- Acceptance of other views as equal in value;
- Seeking reconciliation of different points of view;
- Being conscious of your personal responsibility in the process (engagement).

The differences in perception will persist but you can use them in a constructive way. The challenge for you is to operate within different

worldviews. Can you try to picture yourself as not belonging to any culture and thus being able to mediate between different cultures as an outsider? It is a challenge but maybe an interesting exercise for you to try; just imagine all the different cultural resources and responses that you will be able to use in this case.

#### *4) In Dialogue with the “Other”*

Intercultural learning should be understood as a process towards the “other”. In this case the “other” is at the heart of understanding. It starts with dialogue and yet it goes a step beyond. It is a process that challenges you to perceive yourself and the “other” as different but nevertheless complementary. Intercultural learning opens up the possibility for you to identify with the perspective of the “other”(“walking in each other’s shoes”), without pretending to live what the “other” lives. It can enable you to experience real solidarity and stimulate real co-operation to happen.

#### *5) Constant Change and Questioning*

The experience of intercultural learning is one of constant change, after all it is process-oriented and does not develop so much in evolutionary stages but more in terms of different individual strategies to deal and cope with cultural difference. In this process, one has to accept that there will not always be an answer, or the right answer, and one needs to be open to remain in constant search and to welcome change. Curiosity is important and new perceptions (creativity) are required. Be prepared to:

- Question your assumptions, ideas and stereotypes;
- Break away from your old beliefs, traditions and ideas.

After all, no learning process is free of ruptures, farewells, discoveries and transformation.

#### *6) The Potential of Conflict*

If we take into account the diversity of perceptions different cultures have of time, space, social and personal relations, etc. it appears evident that conflict is sometimes at the heart of intercultural learning. Not every conflict has necessarily a solution but it certainly needs to be expressed. An environment that creates the conditions for self-confidence and mutual trust should also be an environment where people feel comfortable about expressing their:

- Insecurities;
- Doubts;
- Misunderstandings;
- Frustrations and,
- Hurt feelings.

The various expressions of identity and the effort to valorise differences are both challenging aspects of this process. Diversity can be experienced as helpful and enriching, towards new relational forms and solutions, consequently, you can try to unlock the constructive elements and opportunities of conflicts.

## Conclusion

Intercultural learning aims at very deep processes and changes of attitudes and behaviours. It implies dealing most of the time with the invisible forces of culture, those beneath the surface. It is a process of discovery that implies personal engagement and questioning from both sides. It implies risks and tensions, but also opportunities and solutions. It is a question of striking the right balance between challenging ourselves to move further away from our assumptions and respecting our differences as equal elements of the reality.

## Appendixes

1) *“My Own Mirror”* is an intercultural learning exercise that can be found in the Intercultural Learning Training Kit of the Council of Europe (November 2000). It is part of a wider group of individual exercises that aim at encouraging a self-critical, questioning and curious attitude, “learning by discovering ourselves”. We suggest that you try to adapt this exercise to your own circumstances and needs if you feel like deepening your intercultural learning process, and that you include this as part of your personal growing path while doing the Fellowship. If you are a host community foundation you may wish to suggest it to your fellow.

2) *“English for native speakers”* is a short text that tries to highlight the importance of language differences in communication and in particular to address the special linguistic dimensions of the Fellowship, where English is simultaneously the working language and the mother-tongue of at least half of the participants (US fellows).

### 4.2.3 "My own mirror"

*An exercise of self-observation and awareness raising about myself, an invitation to participants to observe themselves and their behaviour and reactions relating to a certain subject. We will be amazed what we discover if we try to look at ourselves through different eyes...*



#### Resources needed

Participants ready and willing to be involved, maybe with some awareness raising units beforehand (about body language, perception, stereotypes, theory of culture and intercultural learning...).

Notebook for each participant.



#### Group Size

Any



#### Time

Can be done during one particular exercise, unit or even a whole day (week...).

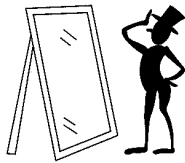
#### Step-by-step



- 1 At the beginning of the unit, the idea of self observation is introduced to the participants. They are invited to "observe themselves" during the day with great attention, their behaviour, reaction to others (what we hear, see and smell...), body language, preferences and feelings...
- 2 They keep a confidential "research diary" and note down any kinds of observation they consider important, as well as the circumstances, the situation, people involved, probable reasons...
- 3 Participants receive a set of main guiding questions, depending on the focus of the observations. The observation could be for example used to talk about stereotypes (How do I perceive and react to others, to which aspects, in which way...?) or elements of culture (What disturbs and attracts me about others? Which reactions or behaviours do I like / dislike? How do I react to things different to me? Which distance do I keep? In which way does this have an impact on my interactions? You could also use Hall & Hall (1990) theories about space and time as a basis for questions.
- 4 The framework of the observation (beginning and end) should be very clear, maybe with some simple rules (respecting each other, confidence of diaries...). It is important that the exercise continues throughout the whole time, as well as in breaks, free time... As a starting point to get into the mood, participants can be invited to "step out of their bodies" and see themselves in a mirror (short exercise). Then, the "normal" programme can be continued. The exercise can be facilitated if after every programme point a short break invites people to note things in their diaries.

- 5 At the end of the unit, participants need to get out of the exercise and "step back into their bodies". Then, a personal time is needed to go through the day and the diary, to re-read it, to reflect upon reasons... (this can have the form of an interview with yourself)
- 6 As a last step, a sharing can be initiated, in the form of an interview between two persons or in very small groups. If the group is very open and has a confident atmosphere, participants can be invited later on to discuss informally with others where they felt certain reactions, in order to exchange their perceptions and develop together new strategies for dealing with them.
- 7 A final round in plenary can enable participants to share how they have lived the exercise, what was interesting, difficult...

### Reflection and evaluation



- Personal: How was it to observe myself? What was difficult? What did I discover? How do I interpret it? Why did I react like this? What does this say about me? Are there similarities, patterns of behaviour I have? Where do certain things come from? Can I link any of my conclusions with any of the theories about culture? Would I react differently if I would be more (or less) conscious about doing the exercise? Are there parallels to my daily life and encounters with other people?
- For the sharing: It is important to stress that people just tell each other what they want to tell, and take the exercise as departure points for further reflections and questions to themselves.

### This method alive



It always depends highly on how the atmosphere in the group is, if we are willing to question our own behaviours, if a positive tension can be created... The exercise can help to discover more closely our own cultural attachments. We can be more attentive in our intercultural encounters, to the mechanisms we develop in coping with it.

The questions have to be specifically adapted to the purpose of the exercise (the more precise the questions are, the better) and the process the group has gone through so far. Attention: it is not always easy for everybody to "observe myself" instead of observing others – it is important to stress that we are asking ourselves questions, rather than others. It is also not easy to remain natural in this exercise.

## Appendix II

### *“English for native-speakers”: how to de-programme yourself*

Language is one of the most visible elements of culture and in that sense a central aspect in intercultural communication. Language allows for communication to occur but is also a source of misunderstandings and is not without limitations (body language helps sometimes to overcome the latter).

In an environment where people have different mother-tongues and where one or two languages become the main means of communication it is often difficult to avoid situations of dominance and the resulting frustration experienced by those who are not fluent in the language(s) that were imposed or democratically chosen for interpersonal communication.

English is often at the centre of this debate because it is one of the world languages that is more commonly used for international business and travel. In the framework of the Fellowship English became naturally the common language for communication, not only because of the trend mentioned above, but also because it plays a unifying role for the European participants whose mother-tongues are very diverse. Furthermore, many of the fellows would lack the necessary language skills to communicate fluently in one or more of the other European languages present in the Fellowship.

### **The problem with native speakers in a multicultural context**

Using our mother-tongue in a multicultural context where other people will also use it to communicate, sometimes as their third or fourth language, can be a difficult experience. We are after all, using our own language and will often forget to adapt our speech mannerisms to other people's level of fluency and understanding. Our natural immediate reaction is to continue to speak as we are used to without realising that our linguistic code may be too “native” to be understood by someone who learned our mother-tongue as a foreign language. The following are a few tips that may help you in getting your message across when communicating in your mother-tongue with non-native speakers.

#### *Speed*

Speed is usually one of the main difficulties for a native speaker. We are used to communicate in a mono-linguistic context and to be as efficient as possible in our use of language. This often means that we speak fast. Changing the rhythm of our speech can be very hard. However, in a multicultural context you should make a conscious effort to speak more slowly so that others can follow you.

#### *Articulation*

Again for efficiency purposes, and in direct relation with speed, we often do not articulate carefully words in our own language because in a mono-



linguistic context everybody shares our communication code and can compensate for the lost vowels and sounds. This is not so when you are speaking to non-native speakers. Try to make an extra effort to articulate your words and people will have an easier time to understand you.

### *Repetition*

We avoid repeating the same idea when we talk, not only for efficiency reasons but also to avoid boring our audience. However, when speaking with a non-native speaker it may be helpful to express the same idea in more than one way to give people a chance to understand what you are trying to convey. You will sometimes see people smiling and nodding at what you are saying without really understanding the meaning of your words or expressions. Some people will be too embarrassed to admit to this and you can spare their frustration by making your thoughts clear in more than one way.

### *Confirmation*

To avoid being in a situation where you are speaking for a long time without any feedback or to make sure that people really understood what you had to say you may ask for confirmation. Do not ask “did you understand what I said?”, this may distress some people, but ask instead “what is your opinion about what I said?” or “does this make sense to you?” or still “did you have a similar experience/feel the same way?”.

### *Accent*

Local, regional and national accents are proof to the linguistic diversity within one single language. However, they can also create barriers to communication with non-native speakers. Our accent is very much part of whom we are and most of us feel proud of it. In a multicultural context this may hinder communication because most people learn foreign languages in a neutral environment and do not get exposed to the various accents a language can have. Although difficult, you can make an effort to change your accent and render it more average. You should also be aware that non-native speakers will have their own “national accent” when speaking your mother-tongue and that they may not always be easy to understand because of that. This often requires some imagination and empathy.

### *Colloquialisms and Idiomatic expressions*

When we speak in our mother-tongue we tend to use colloquialisms and idiomatic expressions that would be difficult to understand outside our cultural environment. They add colour to our speech but when communicating with non-native speakers you may wish to reduce these to a minimum and to provide an explanation to accompany their use. Expressions such as:

- “air one’s dirty laundry in public” (make public something embarrassing that should be kept secret);
- “apple of one’s eye” (one’s favourite);
- “pass muster” (pass a test or check-up, be good enough);

- “pass the buck” (shift responsibility to others), can lead to confusion and poor communication if not properly explained.

### *Cultural references*

We often make reference to cultural elements to communicate. A simple example would be the use of a traditional story, literary figure, book, painting or even television programmes to illustrate our ideas. Although many of these things may be known outside our borders they can hinder communication with non-native speakers who do not share the same references, and will be unable to see the point of our examples. It is advisable to avoid using cultural references unless you are really sure that others share them with you.

### *Use of words/expressions from the host culture*

Your hosts will be delighted not only if you know a few words of their language but if you actively incorporate them in your speech. This does not come automatically and you will have to make an effort but the results can be very positive: it will allow you to establish a closer bond with your host community and it will also give you the chance to use words and expressions that make more sense at local level. Sometimes, the best word to clarify an idea or concept exists in the language of your host.

## The Community Philanthropy Initiative (CPI)

CPI is a programme led by members of the **European Foundation Centre (EFC)** which promotes and sustains the development of Community Philanthropy Organisations (CPOs) in Europe.

### Our Goals

- to strengthen existing CPOs and facilitate the establishment of new ones
- to build the capacity of emerging and established national community philanthropy support organisations and informal networks
- to increase awareness, knowledge and understanding about issues, trends, needs and opportunities affecting CPOs
- to promote and advocate on behalf of the community philanthropy movement to key target audiences in Europe
- to build a strong and sustainable European-level network of community philanthropy organisations, national support centres, donors and other interested groups

### Programme Objectives and Means

#### ◆ **Information:**

- Regular electronic bulletin
- Dossier of basic resource materials
- Monographs on specialised topics
- Web Site
- Periodic review of the field

#### ◆ **Networking, Technical Assistance and Training:**

- Annual Networking Meeting
- Conferences and seminars
- Peer exchange opportunities
- Resource group of community philanthropy experts
- Training activities

#### ◆ **Research:**

- Comparative research
- Studies on best practice and factors that help or hinder the growth of community philanthropy

#### ◆ **Lobbying and Representation:**

- Advocacy activities targeted to European institutions, national and local government officials
- Special briefing materials

#### ◆ **Corporate Outreach:**

- Outreach activities targeted to businesses active in Europe, including specialised resource materials, examples of successful partnerships, linkages with key business networks

51, rue de la Concorde • B-1050 Brussels, Belgium  
tel.: +32.2.512.8938 • fax: +32.2.512.3265  
e-mail: [efc@efc.be](mailto:efc@efc.be) • web: [www.efc.be](http://www.efc.be) & [www.fundersonline.org](http://www.fundersonline.org)

### ***Vision***

A community of informed, inspired, committed, independent funders engaged in seeking solutions to challenges facing humanity in Europe and Internationally.

### ***Mission***

The EFC is a knowledge-based membership association dedicated to strengthening organised philanthropy, which is embedded in and supports civil society, in Europe and Internationally. The EFC helps nurture efforts aimed at supporting independent, accountable and sustainable funders throughout the New Europe, particularly when this fundamental human right to associate private capital for public benefit needs fostering.

### ***Priorities***

The EFC realises its vision and mission through three priorities:

- **Representation and Monitoring** at European Institutions, World Bank and United Nations Institutions
- **Membership Services** including consultancy on legal and fiscal issues and expansion of professional development opportunities for Members' staff
- **Public Record and Public Information Service** on foundations and corporate funders active in and with Europe

### ***Committees***

Two member-driven policy committees broaden membership participation and widen the Centre's outreach:

- **European Union Committee** works on issues internal to the European Union
- **International Committee** advises on issues relating to the wider Europe and in other world regions, namely the Americas, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Mediterranean and Asia

### ***Annual General Assembly and Conference***

The EFC Annual General Assembly (AGA) and Conference has become the premier event on the European independent funding community's calendar and serves as a vital tool in the building of civil society. During the course of the Conference, the EFC convenes its Annual General Assembly of Members.

### ***Background***

Established in 1989 by seven of Europe's leading foundations, the EFC today serves a core membership of more than 200 members, associates and subscribers as well as a further 48,000 organisations linked through a network of information and support centres in 37 countries worldwide. The Centre is an independent international not-for-profit association under Belgian law. Ultimate authority vests in the EFC Annual General Assembly of Members, with governance entrusted to an elected Governing Council, supported by a Management Committee. Day-to-day administration of the Centre is entrusted to its Brussels-based Secretariat under the stewardship of the EFC Chief Executive. Membership of the Centre implies commitment to the EFC brand. Members agree to adhere to the principles and objectives set out in the Prague Declaration, and to a voluntary and self-regulatory Code of Practice endorsed by members and revised and updated on an ongoing basis.