

Transcultural competence: exploring the body of culture.

A response to the workshop presented by Sara Boas in Melbourne, November 2009.

Sue Mullane

The idea of culture has always interested me. As I currently experience divergent aspects of it in my daily life I have often wondered about the known as well as the unknown qualities of it and how these impact on my senses, which I take with me as I encounter others. I live in a rural environment and travel to work in an urban one; I dwell among white Anglo-Saxon people in my local community and work in a community comprised of mainly Vietnamese and Chinese people. I am able-bodied and teach those with a disability.

Sara Boas' workshop explored the five elements she has identified which enable the practicing therapist to 'co-create' a new cultural form or identity with their client, in order to fully meet their client as they exist in their context. These include the requirement to firstly become curious about the other's context, which involves also recognising one's own contextual descriptors. Sara led us through a greeting activity, as a sample of this first phase in her model – 'Contexts: culture-specific knowledge'. I found it intriguing to firstly learn of other's preferred greeting styles (as we stood in a circle) and then to take these freely into space to share at will. How does it feel to offer your hand for someone to shake, who in turn blows you a kiss? What do you do when you wave quietly at someone who then grabs you in a tight hug? As Sara suggested, if we can remain curious 'about our own and each other's contexts we are off to a good beginning'.



Styles of greeting

The next phase in the model offered the idea of 'Concepts: generic cultural knowledge', or 'understanding ways in which cultural contexts may differ'. To illustrate the need to be attentive to the ways in which cultural contexts differ, as they provide insight into hidden differences, values, attitudes and assumptions, participants grouped in 2s and 3s to tell a story of cultural difference.



Playing between different perspectives

In my trio we each told our story, embodied it, and then embodied it from another's perspective. The story was also retold from another's perspective until finally together we each embodied all aspects of the story and played between the various perspectives. This created for me a very real sense of the various 'voices' present in the story. It raised awareness of the other's viewpoint; how it felt 'from their side', and the possible reasons they may have for thinking/ feeling that way. It brought home an understanding of difference without threat or the need to feel defensive.

Cognition or intrapersonal skills were aspects of the third phase. For Sara, cognition refers to a range of skills including the ability 'to shift between different perceptual positions and to reconcile opposing values'. We played with 'perceptual position flexibility', the term coined for our experiential detailing the 6 positions of perception: the first, second and third person positions; a fourth position – identification with

the relationship; along with new positions introduced by Sara, namely the fifth position of zero – the soul – and the sixth, infinity – the transcendent self or spirit – respectively. We were asked to identify the position from which we most felt remote, and to focus on ways of finding more connection with it. I found the experience of shifting between the less-familiar positions (of soul and transcendent spirit) challenging but gratifying for the added dimension they offered to the experience.

We also played with embodied identification of different relational positions through an exercise that began with 3 distinctly different movement motifs and words which, as they inter-related with each other across the space, became less distinct in difference, more refined in form and more familiar/ understood. The feeling evolved to become one of particular unity that was experienced between the motifs until the need for each to ‘be different’ dissolved, leaving them still unique in shape and form but more united with each other than at the beginning. The fourth phase of ‘communication: interpersonal skills’ was presented verbally and non-verbally, with Sara suggesting that most dance-movement therapists, whilst adept at movement-based transcultural communication skills, sometimes also need to utilise unambiguous verbal communication ‘to talk about unspoken assumptions’ and identify explicitly ‘key differences’, in order to move on to ‘mutual understanding and inquiry’.



Becoming more united

The resultant sense of awareness of unity and belonging with other frees the interaction to be authentic and safe in the knowledge it (as a newly co-constructed culture) is accepted, respected and valued. This is the fifth and final stage of Sara’s model, termed ‘consciousness: the unspoken attitudes and identity’ which arises from intentional practice and engagement with the

previous four levels. Sara suggests it is this level in the relationship which ‘makes us ethical’.



Moving to mutual understanding

I was enlivened and challenged equally by aspects of this workshop. I became more aware of my own cultural context and was moved to be offered the contexts of others with such trust and humility. I particularly enjoyed the small group play, and came away from this with a real sense of experiencing a shift in my understanding of the possibilities for relationship: where particular identity is not necessarily lost or muted in its efforts to join with other, but rather can become more solid and firm (in its identification) as it is noticed, accepted and valued for what it represents and is not engulfed as it finds space to notice, accept and value other’s identification for what it represents. Thank you Sara.

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Ed.Note: **Sara Boas** will be returning to Australia in February 2010. Dates for Professional Development events and group supervision opportunities will be advertised when available.

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p. 63. Styles of greeting: Eileen McDonald and Mandy Agnew.

Playing between different perspectives: Jacqui Dreesens, Ranjit Bhagwandas, Robyn Price.

p.64. Becoming more united, Eileen McDonald, Jennifer Helmich.

Moving to mutual understanding, Eileen McDonald, Fran Ostroburski, Silke Didaskalu.