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# Viewing Cultural Barriers as Opportunities to Enhance Learning: An International Perspective

Rosemary S. Caffarella, Cornell University

***Abstract:*** *I argue in this paper that although it is important to understand the key cultural barriers that can inhibit learning in international settings, it is also critical to think differently about these barriers as opportunities to enhance learning. Major cultural factors that influence the formation of these barriers, and examples of cultural barriers and strategies to turn these barriers into opportunities for positive action are discussed.*

## Introduction

Literature that explores cultural barriers to learning in both formal and informal adult education and community development programs in international settings, although not in abundance, does exist. Discussion of these barriers as opportunities for learning is less prevalent. I argue in this paper that although it is important to understand the key cultural barriers that can inhibit learning in both formal and informal settings, it is also critical to think differently about these cultural barriers in that they also may be opportunities to enhance learning. Provided in this paper is a brief description of the major cultural factors that influence the formation of these barriers. Next three of these factors are explored by providing examples of cultural barriers that are linked to each of the factors. The paper concludes with a discussion of what strategies have been used or proposed by scholars/practitioners for ways to turn these barriers into opportunities for positive action. It is my hope that questions and observations will be raised after the presentation to expand our repertoire of understanding of the cultural barriers and how we can turn these barriers into workable opportunities as program planners and instructors in international settings.

This paper is based in the literature related to conceptualizing culture and cultural barriers to formal and informal education from such disciplines and fields as adult and continuing education, community development, anthropology, sociology, and health communications. In addition, data are drawn from the personal experiences of my colleagues and myself in international projects from around the world.

## Cultural Factors

The study of culture, which has been for the most part the preveue of anthropologists, has become a part of other social sciences, including adult and continuing education (Caffarella, 2009; Netting, O'Connor, & Fauri, 2008; Regan, 2005; Rothman, 2006). Rothman “defines culture as a set of values, beliefs, and practices grounded in common history and experiences shared by a group, which is viewed as distinct and different from that of other groups” (p.8). Cultural barriers to formal and informal learning programs are fostered by a number of cultural factors that are embedded within these groups that span from organizations and communities to regions, and nations. By no means an exhaustive list, the factors discussed most often in the literature include: social class; race; ethnicity; gender; religion; language differences; political ideologies and practices; geographic regions; economic conditions; and family and kinship patterns (Regan,

2005). It is the strong beliefs and norms, embedded in different cultures held by the people who are involved in the programs for adult learners—planners, learners, volunteers, stakeholders, just to name a few—from whence cultural barriers spring.

### **Cultural Barriers**

Cultural barriers are comprised of situations that are grounded in cultural factors that obstruct the workings in educational programs. These barriers are often highly complex, and as noted above, are based in the values and beliefs of groups of people. Acknowledging cultural differences and barriers have long been overlooked by many adult educators in international settings, especially in low- and middle-income countries and in all types of program endeavors such as teaching mothers about healthy diets for their babies, urging farmers to change the way they plant and cultivate their crops, and in empowerment and community development programs (Nyong, A., Adensina, F., & Osman Elasha, B., 2007; Paul, Stolfus, & Caffarella, 2010). There are programs and community action projects, however, where cultural differences were viewed as legitimate to consider in the educational processes, and cultural barriers and important to address (Caffarella, Kamis, Muhamad, Omar, 2008; Kreps & Sivaram, 2008; Yip, et.al, 2008).

An example of one specific program, a breast cancer education program in Malaysia (CaEd), is discussed to illustrate an adult education program which does take these barriers and ways to address them into account (Caffarella, 2006; Caffarella, Kamis, Muhamad, Omar, 2008). Malaysia is a multicultural country in Southeast Asia that consists of three major cultural groups, the Malays who are primarily Muslim, the Chinese, and the Indian. I have served as the Co-Director of this program for almost seven years. The program is a collaborative project, with the founding partners Universiti Putra Malaysia and Cornell University, although many other stakeholder groups are also involved. From the project's initiation, we have chosen the path of viewing as critical to the project's success integrating into the planning and implementation process local knowledge, that is the voices of Malaysians, such as patients, health care providers, government and non-governmental organizations, and private businesses. We found this action to be fundamental to our practice. For example, I had a Malaysian post-doctoral student at Cornell for three years to help me bridge the many aspects of culture of which I was not aware, and which could have become barriers because of inappropriate ways I might have acted. We were also able to glean cultural patterns from the literature and our practice, which were invaluable to allow us to continue on our journey. Malaysians share many attributes of the Eastern ways of knowing and learning such as priority to collective accomplishments, relationship based, emotion-centered thinking and not so aggressive in approach (Lim, 2003; Merriam and Associates, 2007). For instance I had to learn to "hold back" my normal assertive self in working with powerful officials whose support was really needed for the program to succeed. We also hit many different barriers, some of which we were able to overcome, such as major differences among partners about the format and content of the educational materials on breast cancer we were translating into Bahasa Melayu. We are still tackling other barriers like the cultural taboos related to breast cancer, and the working relationships between those who practice western medicine and the traditional Malay healers.

To demonstrate further examples of cultural barriers, specific examples of these barriers are outlined linked to three of the cultural factors. These factors include political ideologies and practices, language differences, and ethnicity.

Table One: Cultural Barriers that Impede Learning

<i>Factors</i>	<i>Examples of Barriers</i>
Political ideologies and Practices	Powerful people in government block educational programs because one of the goals of these programs is assist learners in understanding power in organizational setting and how to use power in negotiating with these governmental agencies.
Language Differences	Planners do not recognize the importance of culturally appropriate translations, and therefore do not see a need to go beyond a literal translation of the document as it is currently written, which often is in English
Ethnicity	In fostering collaborative educational programs between or among ethnic groups the underlying distrust, and sometimes even open hostility of the other group(s) is a constant block to developing any cohesive community action and educational program.

There are of course many more barriers that could be listed under each of these factors, and others that are yet to be discussed in the literature or even unknown at this point in time.

### **Strategies for Turning Barriers into Opportunities**

There have been numerous strategies either actually used in the practice of planners and instructors or proposed in making these barriers into opportunities (Cervero & Wilson, 2006; Forester, 1999; 2009; Kreps & Sivaram, 2008; Yip, et.al, 2008). Some of the most common ones include: a) changing communication methods and channels, b) using the knowledge and skills of “insiders”, that is local organizations and group, as well as that brought to the table by those with “outside” expertise”, that is professionals who come from “abroad”, c) linking with local groups and individuals who are able and willing to translate in a culturally sensitive and linguistically appropriate manner useful materials in the major language of the region, d) listening carefully to the many local stakeholders to gain a clearer understanding of cherished beliefs and norms, especially those strongly held taboos and ways of decision making, e) crafting positive ways to respond to issues of power between and among organizations, governmental agencies, and key power brokers, and f) expecting and acting on the many “surprises” that will crop up during educators’ journeys as instructors, program planners, and community developers. Specific strategies linked to examples of cultural barriers given in Table One are outlined in Table Two.

Table Two: Strategies for Turning Barriers into Opportunities

<b><i>Factor: Political Ideology and Practices</i></b>	
<i>Examples of Barriers</i>	<i>Examples of Strategies</i>
Powerful people in government block educational programs because one of the goals of these programs is assist learners in understanding power in organizational setting and how to use power in negotiating with these governmental agencies.	Build into the basic principles and practices of a program the empowerment of learners, professional staff, and volunteers so they feel competent to work, and especially to negotiate with government officials. Action learning methods can be used to build this sense of empowerment in the program staff and participants to address a specific problem or issue that has been blocked by the critical power brokers.
<b><i>Factor: Language Differences</i></b>	
Planners do not recognize the importance of culturally appropriate translations, and therefore do not see a need to go beyond translating as it is currently written, which often is in English	Work closely with translators who are “native speakers” to ensure the structure of the language and the words chosen are meaningful to program participants. In addition, use only pictures, graphics, and other types of pictorial displays that are acceptable within the boundaries of cultural norms.
<b><i>Factor: Ethnicity</i></b>	
In fostering collaborative educational programs between or among ethnic groups the underlying distrust, and sometimes even open hostility of the other group(s) is a constant block to developing any cohesive community action and educational program.	Reexamine the original objectives and context of the program is in order judge whether these are still realistic. Especially when the majority of the planning group is outsiders, it is not unusual for them to have missed the power of the sometimes invisible ethnic divides that exist within a geographic area where the project is located. Re-focusing the objectives may be one answer to this barrier, such as focusing at the initial stages of the project on building collaborative relationships among the many factions of each of the ethnic groups. It then may be possible that the opinion leaders of each group might be able to begin to build these types of relationships between or among groups.

### Conclusion

Identifying cultural barriers to learning and educational programs is difficult at best, especially when programs are based in countries that are unfamiliar, do not speak the language, and have not yet had the time to establish positive working relationships with the local people. Part of this difficulty comes from some educators who either have little knowledge of the importance that culture plays in learning, or dismiss the notion that culture makes a difference in the educational

process. These latter two scenarios are barriers unto themselves, without even considering those that exist within the cultural milieu of the area where one is located. Culture, however, does matter in learning; therefore it is imperative for scholars and practitioners in adult education to take time to get to know the culture of the area and people. In addition, they need to listen well to those with whom they are working, including gaining a clear picture of the role that culture plays in building barriers to learning and planning programs for adults. At the same time, these educators need not let these barriers become blocks to the educational process, but rather search out ways to turn these barriers into opportunities through the experiences of educators who have worked effectively in these situations, the research that has been completed, and their own creativity and willingness to be patient as in some cases some of these barriers actually seem to fade away, and it may even be difficult to realize why or how.

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