

VisualsSpeak Case Study: Tailoring Training for Transitions

The Setting

For over three decades, the annual Summer Institute for Intercultural Communication has brought people from all over the world together to further develop their skills working across cultural differences. The Summer Institute consists of a variety of offerings ranging in length from two hours to five days over a period of three weeks.

During its first ten years at Stanford University as the Stanford Institute for Intercultural Communication and in the years since, under the auspices of the Intercultural Communication Institute in Portland, Oregon, the Institute has become a creative community of intercultural scholars and practitioners from many cultures that meet to renew their energies and commitments.

The Workshop

Tailoring Training for Transitions was begun as a class in the mid-1990s as a part of the Summer Institute's curriculum. The workshop presents an overview of the rapidly-evolving approaches to intercultural training for people who are experiencing a transition from one culture to another. The transition may be international, but may also be between ethnic groups, institutions, social groups, or departments within corporations and organizations. The offering is designed for trainers and other professionals responsible for orientation, professional integration and/or re-entry programs in academic, corporate and non-profit settings.

The objectives of the workshop centered on assessment, development, and familiarity. Participants explore issues of transition related to their target audience(s), learning training approaches and methods that are immediately applicable to their work environment. As they become familiar with current advances in the theory of intercultural adaptation, participants learn to assess the needs of individuals making transitions and to develop programs that assist individuals and groups in making transitions. Finally, enrollees are pushed to consider alternative ways of applying theory to training methods as they learn to adapt training strategies to specific situations and to customize designs. Along the way, they receive constructive feedback on their own existing or proposed programs.

The Facilitators

The Tailoring Training for Transitions workshop was led by Dr. Bruce La Brack and Margaret D. (Peggy) Pusch. La Brack, a cultural anthropologist, South Asian specialist and world traveler, has been on the faculty at the University of the Pacific for over thirty years. At the university, he has designed and developed innovative and integrated orientation and re-entry programs for study abroad, and is the director of the Institute for Cross-Cultural Training. He is also a frequent and well-respected author.

Pusch, an active trainer in the United States and Europe, has served as associate director of the Intercultural Communication Institute and as executive director of the Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research in the United States of America. As a co-founder and president of Intercultural Press, she has been responsible for several of the seminal texts in the field. She has also served as board chair of the International Partnership for Service Learning and Leadership, and has received awards for a lifetime of achievement and service from several professional organizations.

The Participants

Participants in the workshop come from a variety of organizations. Largely, they draw from corporations, non-governmental organizations, counseling practices, and student-exchange programs. The common thread is that all of the participants are professionals who assist people in some kind of human transition experience whether they are moving from place to place, have been displaced in some way, or are transitioning in their career path. The largest group of these workshop participants is generally those who help to prepare people for living overseas.

The Need

The five-day class was considered very successful, and participants learned material that helped them in their jobs. The facilitators, however, were interested in introducing more experiential activities into the class. The current model, five days of lectures by the faculty and discussions about a wide range of transition theories and models, provided a general frame of what transition is about—but the faculty felt they could do more.

The Approach

The first element to be integrated into the class was an exercise on the afternoon of day one. Using the VisualsSpeak Image Set, the visuals were used to surface transition stories from the participants' own lives. Each person was asked to use the images to respond to three questions:

- Who were you when you were going through the transition?
- Who were you before you made the transition?
- Who are you after going through the transition?

After creating the images, each person was asked to share the story of their image with the rest of the class. Over the years as the activity has been repeated, the stories have included experiences of living in different countries, through natural disasters, breakup of relationships, and a host of other transitions. Some have been very emotional and others, more intellectual.

A number of participants have reported being surprised at the depth of the story and the emotion that was surfaced in the process. Several have expressed surprise that what they talked about retained a significant amount of emotion attached, although it was something they felt was in the past.

Why It Worked

Transitions are powerful. Using visuals causes people to look at a more concrete story. Not only do they revisit their own stories, but they also learn what the other participants have been through. This provides insight as well as bonding for the group.

While many of the participants are familiar with traditional transition models, there are often cases when some of the models do not hold true in real life. The experience of transition is much more individual, and can be more painful or personal. The visuals address the feelings around the experience. People discover their experience is not weird, unique or isolated. They learn that other people have been through it, and that it is a human experience to respond to change.

The learning in the workshop shifted to become much more inductive after the visuals were added. The class started with the participants' own experiences and then moved into exploring the theoretical constructs for the balance of the week. The rich pool of shared stories of the initial activities, however, enabled the theoretical models to come alive. Individuals could see their own unique details in the context of many others' experiences and shared patterns.

The deep reflection on the experience created a different frame of reference. This impacted the participants' design of the programs they deliver. They could build on the class experiences to consider how to plan for others' transitions.

Facilitator Feedback

Peggy Pusch, one of the class' facilitators, noted that, "the visuals are an aid, not an end in itself. They help people get in touch with a different form of expression. It's more creative, and they get at a whole different level of seeing the impact of transition. People lose the self-consciousness around the details. They talk about the pictures. It's almost objective, yet they are baring their soul. But it's OK, since it's pictures."

Pusch also noted that because these classes have participants from around the world, English (the language in which the sessions are taught) is not a native language for many. The use of the visuals remove the focus on quality of speech, allowing people to talk in a more relaxed manner and allowing much of the anxiety around speaking in a group to ease.

"Using VisualsSpeak, I can tap into how people are feeling and thinking. I'm more effective as a facilitator, and we get at deeper things, including the more intuitive. Things come out that don't if you just ask someone for their story."