

## ***Reflection “Intercultural Awareness”***

### **Week 1**

The first week was an introduction. I already gained an insight on what comes to play when designing for different cultures. The 5 cultural dimensions were introduced, and we were introduced to the assignment.

One thing we were assigned to do, was making a presentation of one chapter of the book. We also need to deliver a final deliverable in the form of a multimedia presentation. Think of a movie clip. For this movie clip we need to interview an expat who got experience in working within or with (people from) foreign cultures. I thought of family or friends working or having worked abroad, and I came up with my uncle who worked in China some time ago. My team member, Tommie Perenboom, thought of his grandmother, whose origin is in Indonesia.

Regarding our presentation, first we would need to read some chapters to gain some insight on how we could implement this assignment in a presentation. We also found some expats to interview. I think I yet have to discover the key to understand the differences, although I understand the theories that have been discussed.

### **Week 2**

The second week we discussed power distance. Reading the chapters I began to apply the theories to my own culture and to my environment. I started to think about the things regarded as common, but which can be quite uncommon for different cultures. I thought it was fairly neutral for everyone to be equal. But after reading the book, I found this wouldn't make sense at all. Where the Trias Politicas and democracy is seen as the best way here, the dictatorial regimes are seen as the best solution for power division in other countries.

### Week 3

For the third week we covered individualism versus collectivism and masculinity versus femininity. The first didn't yet open my eyes as in complete cultural awareness, but instead added another part of what I considered was a static theory. I learned that I had both individualistic and collectivistic values. I started this chapter thinking of extremes: collectivism as in socialism, individualism as in liberalism. But reading about the values, I found that I hold on the values of many of the different dimensions. I also recognized differences in cultures: importance of family in Mediterranean Europe and importance of independence of individuals in the Northern of Europe.

That same week we covered masculinity versus femininity. From then, I started making connections with each part of the theory. It slowly started to evolve in a revelation that no culture is good or bad. For example, masculine cultures are more competitive and aimed on performance whereas feminine cultures are more aimed on welfare and on making least compromises as possible. Both can be useful for different markets, being reflected in why different markets are flourishing more in one country than another. But I didn't link this insight to other dimensions than the masculinity index.

### Week 4

The fourth week was about the uncertainty avoidance index and the long-term versus short-term orientation. These subjects made me realize the cultural dimensions were variables for different cultures to be filled in by the local culture. Reading about the professional nature of these dimensions, I learned the culture goes beyond home and work life. I found out culture defines and controls everything. It's values and practices we learn, how we work, why we do things, but also what decisions are made in politics. Uncertainty avoidance (UAI) contributed in my view on laws and the perspective of looking at other cultures. I learned that low UAI contributes in loose rules, just few agendas and general acceptance of what is different. High UAI contributes in many laws and agendas as well as general suspicion towards what is different.

Long-term versus short-term orientation gave me an insight on how different cultures make decisions or how the UAI influences taking action in different culture. Short-term orientation leads to impulsive action, leading to direct result. This can be connected to traditions. Long-term orientations lead to decisions based on how it will influence the future. Where short-term orientation is about being very specific, long-term orientation is more about maintaining general values and has a bigger margin for own interpretations. Where short-term orientation is focused on the method upon how one reaches the result, long-term orientation is focused on the result itself and not on the method which accomplished the desired result. I found that no culture was either completely short-term or long-term oriented, but shared many values of each side. I thus think this dimension is stronger segregated on smaller scale, for example production line versus making investments.

## Week 5

This week I read about the implications of culture differences. In these chapters I read about practical problems and solutions of culture differences and encounters. Here I found no single culture is neutral while the others are supposedly biased. We are all biased in such a way we all have values that have pros and cons. Culture per definition is being biased, having opinions, norms and values.

We all have different symbols, heroes, values or rules. This is what shapes the culture, although it might not be visible to a foreigner. I think because of this cultural awareness doesn't come naturally. My conclusion is that we need to be careful with other cultures as in being open to other cultures and to question our own values. It is easy to think the own values are the best or neutral, but anyone thinks that way. The dimensions are just a means of indicating where the differences are and how we can pay attention to that. These are not a rule which we have to hold on to. Cultures change, but the inner values remain in essence the same.

## Week 6

This was the last week, where we had to present our interview with an expatriate. Our interviewee was Gerrit-Jan Steenbergen. He had a lot of experience working in foreign countries and had a lot to say with a business side of view on the intercultural awareness. As we interviewed him about different topics, he also showed a slide presentation about the company. As he told different things either connected to cultural issues or characteristics, I recognized the different dimensions. He tried to explain these issues and characteristics by means of economics and generalizations.

But I saw connections with the dimensions theories. As he generalizes for example the Japanese culture of leadership, he tells about decisions being made after seven o'clock with only Japanese people. According to him they don't trust anyone else. In my opinion it is more than just trust. It's the difference in individualism and uncertainty avoidance index. Where Japan is moderately collectivistic (not much, however), whereas Western countries are more individualistic (towards the extremes, >70), it's obvious that Japan doesn't like to blend with Western countries. Next to that, taking a look at the history of Japan (I happen to know a little about that, thanks to the secondary school Art final exams) they were not letting Western countries trade with them. This is still visible to some extent, which can be related to the uncertainty avoidance index. The Japanese bosses making decisions in 'exclusive' teams looks in my opinion really similar to that.

That was just one of the many comparisons I could make with the theory and the stories and anecdotes Gerrit-Jan told us during the interview. This is why the other fragments were added on the DVD as well.

But that is not all. I started to recognize the dimensions everywhere. How normally casual discussions about foreign cultures were based on prejudices and generalizations, I now was able to explain the problems or themes of the discussions according to Hofstede's theory.

One of the things I now see is that intercultural awareness is not just applying theories. The theory of Geert Hofstede in my opinion is a guideline of what to expect, as it shows a lot of findings. But that is not what intercultural awareness is about. I think it is the acceptance of cultures, and the critical view on one's own culture. People living in different cultures are not different than you, but you are different than them. Especially when one visits a foreign country or is an expatriate in a foreign country.

Talking about 'different cultures' with respect to intercultural awareness seems already a contradiction to me. In my opinion, 'different' stands for 'something else than you', what refers to one's view on various cultures. I would like to refer to 'the variety of cultures' instead. This shows how rich the world is of people with varying norms and values. In my opinion there is no good or bad (at least when it comes to cultural differences).

For me, intercultural awareness is realizing that the variety of cultures is not strange or weird. It is something one needs to take some effort for to understand. I now also find it easier to place myself in the view point of people from various cultures. Having read the theory, I also see patterns in the examples that are given, but it is very hard to actually apply them, as the stereotypes just don't fit. Everyone is different, and applies culture in a different way.

Coming back to the last session, I found it quite surprising to hear an insight on the integration politics of immigrants from foreign countries. The interviewee was quite eager to learn Dutch and to get to learn the Dutch culture when she would come here, but then she was stuck learning the Dutch language. She just couldn't get the paperwork done for learning Dutch. My conclusion of that is, that the government wants foreign immigrants to integrate into our society. With an intercultural point of view that is only correct to a certain extent. Getting these immigrants to know about the Dutch language and culture is great, but forcing them to become Dutch is wrong in my opinion. Besides, if the government wants to accomplish this, it is just not working out right now. Considering the amount of people who not speak Dutch, don't understand the Dutch but live in the Netherlands anyway, I think it is not the right way. The government failed in this perspective.

Looking to America where the uncertainty avoidance index is quite lower, I conclude that decades ago already many different cultures lived together in peace over there. The big cities like New York are very rich environments because of the massive variety of different cultures. And the great thing is, everyone seems to get along while keeping hold of his or her own cultures. I think that works a lot better than trying to integrate immigrants whereas this is not entirely possible to the extent it is expected now.