

How Learning New Cultures Boosts Your Creativity

by Louise Rasmussen - July 26, 2015

<https://www.globalcognition.org/contact-cultures-boosts-creativity/>

Yuck!

Splashes of chicken blood and insects fly everywhere.

The old Chinese woman waves the butcher knife and squirming corpse triumphantly. She flashes a toothless grin.

You're speechless. Flabbergasted. Gassed out big time.

You thought you'd take a leisurely stroll in a quaint out-door market. You expected to see some strange veggies. Marvel at oddly shaped pastries. Explore exotic spices and teas.

Instead you now have an absurd massacre etched onto your retina.

Your colleague who moved to China a few months before you notices your horror. "It's just something they do," he clarifies. Smirking.

You've heard living abroad is good for you. Experiences like this one make you go "Seriously?"

Yes. Seriously.

Researchers William Maddux and Hajo Adam from the INSEAD business school along with their colleague Adam Galinsky from Northwestern University have discovered not only that [cultural experiences are good for you](#). They've discovered why they're good for you.

Cultural experiences can make you more creative.

Can being the operative word. It doesn't happen by osmosis.

Maddux and his colleagues found that just going overseas doesn't by itself make you more creative. In fact, it's alarmingly easy to miss the opportunity to reap this benefit.

The good news? You only need to use one simple trick to ensure that your [contact with new cultures](#) boosts your creativity.

Learn How a New Culture Works to Get Creative

Maddux and his colleagues discovered that deeply learning new cultures you encounter is key to reaping cognitive rewards.

The team did a series of experiments with [people who had lived abroad](#) for a long time.

They asked the sojourners to recall experiences where they either:

- learned something about the culture they lived in abroad
- learned something about their own culture
- did something unrelated (like visiting a supermarket)

Those who recalled learning something about a new culture? They did much better on a creative problem solving task immediately afterwards.

Maddux and his team wondered though. Does learning new cultures always help?

Is it enough to just notice that another culture is different? If you want to boost your creativity, that is. Or, do you also have to learn why it's different?

In another experiment they had a group of people recall an experience where they learned something new about a foreign culture. Except, they hadn't been able to learn about the reasons for it.

Say for example. They might have noticed that Chinese people seem to give special significance to the color red. But they never figured out what this color meant in Chinese culture.

The people who recalled an experience where they discovered the hidden reasons for the novel, different, or unexpected behaviors they had come across. They were much more creative afterwards than those who didn't.

This means that even though discovering that cultural differences exist is great. It's not enough to influence how you think in other situations.

You have to learn *why* a cultural difference exists.

Maddux explains it something like this. The act of pursuing the difference. Understanding it. Making connections between your existing ways of thinking and new ways of thinking. It's practice.

That's what helps you spot new connections later. In other aspects of your life.

So, how exactly do you go about getting this practice?

Explore Your Unexpected, Unusual, Unpleasant Experiences

When you come across something in a new culture you find different, disturbing, or disgusting.

Like a Chinese chicken massacre.

Ask yourself. Ask someone else. "Why?"

Why on earth would they DO THAT?

To you, the whole scene. The blood. The dirt. The flies. So unsanitary.

Say you asked a Chinese person about the chicken scene. You'd discover that Chinese people are all about fresh. Fresh veggies. Fresh meat. For meat to be fresh, animals should be killed and eaten in the same day. In fact, to a Chinese person, meat that has been laying around in the supermarket for a few days. It's pretty disgusting.

If you think about it. It kind of makes sense. That ground beef you fish out of the freezer at Piggly-Wiggly. All pink on the outside and brownish on the inside. What's up with that?

And, be sure to seek out a couple of different points of view. Observations like the one your colleague made. "That's just the way they are." They're fairly unhelpful. They don't get to the reason for the difference.

To make sure your experiences improve your creativity. Get beyond simplifications like that. Use [strategies for digging deeper](#).

Keep an Eye on the Lightbulb Moment

Flash.

The insight pops into your head out of nowhere.

Creative moments can seem a bit like miracles. Like something you can't really control.

Only. You can.

Maddux and his colleagues show that learning new cultures can make you more creative.

This means that you can in fact improve your mind's ability to make connections, to spot opportunities and to generate innovative ideas.

Going overseas isn't in your budget or on your agenda right now?

Don't worry. It's possible to practice before you head out.

Luckily cultural differences are everywhere.

The Japanese exchange student sitting next to you who never speaks up in class. The Middle Eastern cab driver who shows you a million pictures of his sons. The waitress at the local Thai restaurant who asks you why you aren't married yet.

Even if you find yourself feeling upset, insulted, or offended. Keep your eye on the prize. Make it a habit

to [keep your personal feelings in check](#) so you can learn from your cultural experiences.

Paying attention. Digging into behaviors, even ones that [seem like transgressions](#) give you practice making new connections.

They can open up your mind.

And help you shine light on new possibilities.

Maddux, W., Adam, H., & Galinsky, A. (2010). When in Rome ... Learn Why the Romans Do What They Do: How Multicultural Learning Experiences Facilitate Creativity *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 36 (6), 731-741 DOI: [10.1177/0146167210367786](https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167210367786)

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