

How to Manage Cross-Cultural Misunderstandings

by Winston Sieck - February 23, 2018

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If you've ever traveled to another country, you've likely experienced some disorientation. And perhaps a few surprises. We tend to expect a bit of the unexpected when we travel far and immerse ourselves in a vastly different culture.

But for teachers, it's important to think about those small moments of cross-cultural misunderstanding that may be happening in your familiar, everyday classroom.

These moments can lead to tension and confusion between students, as well as between student and teacher. They can create barriers to student learning and effective classroom management.

It's easy to view these odd episodes as bothersome distractions from your core lesson. But they also contain [cross-cultural learning opportunities](#) that are often overlooked.

Carol Archer of the University of Houston coined the term, "culture bump" to describe this experience. She first explained the concept in a chapter titled, [Culture bump and beyond](#), defining it as the moment when:

"an individual from one culture finds himself or herself in a different, strange or uncomfortable situation when interacting with persons of a different culture"

Archer's article offers recommendations for teachers who want to get a grip on cross-cultural misunderstandings. She also provides a process for overcoming culture bumps through reflection and ongoing learning.

A mindset for cross-cultural misunderstandings

Archer lays out several common classroom management situations that may feel all too familiar, such as students who speak out of turn. Or, students who come to class late, and feel the need to explain themselves, further disrupting the lesson.

However, in a diverse classroom made up of students from varying cultures, it's often possible that what teachers interpret as intentional "misbehavior" is actually the result of a cross-cultural misunderstanding.

These bumps provide rich opportunities for self-reflection and the development of [intercultural competence](#).

With a good supporting process, you can move beyond a tired position of feeling personally offended by student behavior. And instead, embrace a more curious stance that will lead to more effective communication and classroom management overall.

How to work through cross-cultural misunderstandings

A key tenet of Archer's ideas is self-reflection. If you think you may be experiencing a culture bump in your classroom, your goal is not simply to analyze the students' actions. Instead, you want to engage with the gap in understanding that exists between you and the students.

This sort of reflection can help you see how your expectations are grounded in your own cultural background. The full approach can also help students from other cultures better understand the expectations of their classroom.

Archer outlines this process as follows:

- **Identify Behaviors.** First, identify the behaviors that you and the student are each engaging in at the time you feel tension or discomfort. For example, *I am instructing the class, and a student is whispering to a classmate while I teach.*
- **Identify Feelings.** Next, identify the feelings this behavior causes, for example, *disrespected, uncertain of my ability to maintain the entire class' attention.*
- **Identify Expectations.** Next, identify the expectations you have for students in that moment. For example, *I expect all students to be silent when I am providing instruction.*
- **Reflect on Underlying Values.** Finally, reflect on the values that are grounded in your own cultural background that give rise to these expectations and feelings. For example, *taking turns is polite and respectful, and only one person should talk at a time. Teachers should have the attention of the entire class when speaking because this shows respect.*

Finally, you can calmly ask the student a question to [find out why](#) they were engaging in the behavior that left you flummoxed. You might find that a student who comes in late, for example, had been taught to obtain the teacher's permission before joining class.

By remaining reflective and curious, you can better understand the [distinct norms and values](#) that are driving your students. With that insight, you can more effectively work to close the gap that results from this difference in culture through explicit instruction.

Managing expectations with cultural understanding

Having the same expectations of all your students, regardless of their home culture, is totally appropriate. However, it's important to be clear and explicit about those expectations and their underlying value so that all students can truly understand what behavior is expected of them.

Using the frame of culture bumps allows you and your students to talk about observable behavior as opposed to resorting to assumptions, stereotypes, or feelings of personal conflict.

Reflect on the values you create within your classroom culture. Invite all your students to participate in that culture through behavior you explicitly teach and reinforce. You'll make your classroom a less confusing place where true connection and learning can occur.

It also helps to remember that old habits die hard. Everyone's habits. Try to be gentle with your students, and with yourself.

Image Credit: [ArtsyBee](#)

Archer, C. M. (1986). Culture bump and beyond. In J. M. Valdes (Ed.), *Culture bound: Bridging the cultural gap in language teaching* (pp. 170-178). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

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