

Culturally Appropriate Training--How to Do It Right!

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The work world and global marketplace is quickly becoming more and more multi-cultural. In these settings and with these groups of trainees, culturally appropriate training (CAT) can and should be followed to ensure that the training is well-received and that it does not “backfire” due to cultural differences. Training development and delivery needs to incorporate certain principles of CAT and avoid other inappropriate methods. In this paper we will examine these, including:

- ✓ Using language as an ice-breaker
- ✓ Learning objectives (for the original presentation as well as this paper);
- ✓ Adult learning principles (ALPs – as a “given”)
- ✓ Diversity training (as a “given”)
- ✓ Various definitions of “culture”
- ✓ Elements of culture
- ✓ Examples of culture
- ✓ CAT and its definition
- ✓ Valuable traits for CAT trainers
- ✓ How to prepare for CAT
- ✓ Involving others in CAT
- ✓ Dos and don'ts for CAT
- ✓ Culturally *in*appropriate training (CIT)
- ✓ Great quote on “culture”

Using language as an ice-breaker

Here's a nice way to open a training session on CAT – the word “greetings” in 22 other languages (with each ones country, location, or people):

Aloha! (Hawaiian), Bonjour! (French), Buenos dias! (Spanish), Buon giorno! (Italian), G'day! (Aussie), Geia sou! (Greek), Guten tag! (German), Hallo! (Icelandic), Keshi! (Zuni), Konnichi wa! (Japanese), Kwai! (Abenaki), Nabat! (Somali), Namaskar! (Hindi), Ni hao! (Mandarin), Oki! (Blackfoot), Pryvit! (Ukrainian), Rozhbash! (Kurdi), Salaam! (Arabic/Farsi), Shalom! (Hebrew), Tan kahk! (Passamaquoddy Tribe), Yokwe! (Marshallese), and Zhivjo! (Slovenian)!

Learning objectives

The learning objectives (for the original presentation as well as this paper) were or are as follows:

- ✓ Describe the basic principles of good training/adult learning

- ✓ Define “culture” and “culturally appropriate training” (“CAT”)
- ✓ Describe what research should take place before CAT
- ✓ Explain the importance of involving the “persons of culture” in CAT
- ✓ Explain the use of CAT surveys
- ✓ Approach trainees just before their CAT course
- ✓ List three each dos and don’ts of culturally appropriate training
- ✓ Explain the pitfalls of culturally *in*appropriate training (CIT)
- ✓ Develop culturally appropriate training

Good training and adult learning principles (APLs)

If we’re going to engage in CAT or any training for that matter, it should be a “given” that it will be good training and we will use good adult learning principles (APLs). Good training is good training no matter what type it is – EHS, CAT, OJT, or any other. These APLs include (but are by no means limited to) the following:

- ✓ **Self-directed:** Adult learners are very self-directed.
- ✓ **Immediate need or nature:** Adult learners prefer their training to be about things of an immediate nature or need.
- ✓ **Directly applicable:** The topic and materials should be directly applicable to them.
- ✓ **Involved in setting the agenda:** Adult learners prefer to be directly involved in setting the agenda.
- ✓ **Draw on their experiences:** Adult learners like to draw on their own work and life experiences.
- ✓ **Solve problems:** Adult learners are problem-solvers.
- ✓ **Flexibility in discussions:** Adult learners prefer that the discussions and trainer are flexible to accommodate their self-directedness.
- ✓ **Participation:** Adult learners like to participate in the training – often a lot!

Diversity training

Similarly to the given of good training and APLs above, it is another “given” that CAT should include but be more than diversity training. Good diversity training typically might include the following elements:

- ✓ We’re all different...
- ✓ ...Yet we’re all the same
- ✓ We have different values...
- ✓ ...But we should value our differences
- ✓ We should embrace diversity...
- ✓ ... And be aware of various legal issues such as discrimination.

What is “culture”?

If we wish to understand CAT better, first we must understand “culture” better. So, what exactly is “culture”? Here are some good questions to help us better understand this:

- ✓ What is your definition of “culture”?
- ✓ What is the dictionary definition of “culture”?
- ✓ What is or are your culture(s) – how do you self-identify with your own culture?
- ✓ What are some types and examples of culture(s)?

What is your definition of “culture”?

Before we look at others’ definitions of “culture,” take a minute to consider and/or formulate your own definition of culture. What exactly is culture? What are some examples of culture? Got it all set? Excellent! Let’s take a look at some others now.

What is a good dictionary type definition of “culture”?

Rather than an actual dictionary definition, let’s look at a couple of textbook definitions. Both of these are from Associate Professor Ifte Choudhury at Texas A&M University (TAMU). Professor Choudhury defines “culture” as:

“Culture refers to the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving.”

Certainly a comprehensive definition, albeit hardly a good “working” one that we can easily get our arms (or brains) around. Fortunately he also has a good working definition.

“A culture is a way of life of a group of people--the behaviors, beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept, generally without thinking about them, and that are passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next.”

A much simpler one that likely works in most situations. Well, now that we have adequately defined culture, let’s look at some examples of it.

What is or are your culture(s)?

How do you self-identify your own culture(s)? What types, elements, and/or examples do you use for yourself?

Types and examples of culture

There are both obvious and not so obvious types or elements of culture. Some typically obvious culture types include the following list:

- ✓ Ethnicity
- ✓ Native country
- ✓ Language
- ✓ Race or Creed
- ✓ Color
- ✓ Religion
- ✓ Gender
- ✓ Sexual orientation
- ✓ Age

Some not so obvious culture types include the following:

- ✓ Locale (e.g., Texas culture, West coast culture, etc.)
- ✓ Disability (e.g., “Deaf culture”)
- ✓ Politics (e.g., Conservative, Liberal, Green, etc.)

- ✓ Eating (e.g., vegan, etc.)
- ✓ Consumerism (e.g., “got to have it now” culture)
- ✓ Hobbies/Activities (e.g., Model railroaders)
- ✓ Profession (e.g., Safety culture?)
- ✓ Education (e.g., College degree, various colleges, etc.)

Author’s cultural self-images

As you read this paper, unless you know me you really have little way of knowing my cultures. If you’re going to ask other persons to share information about their culture types, then you have to be prepared to share your own culture types. In that spirit and as an example, here are my obvious culture types or examples:

- ✓ White
- ✓ Middle-aged
- ✓ Male
- ✓ Baby Boomer
- ✓ Health-conscious
- ✓ Married
- ✓ IH/EHS

Culturally Appropriate Training (CAT)

Now that we’ve examined culture, let’s turn our attention and focus to CAT. We will discuss the following questions and their answers (of course).

- ✓ CAT - what is it?
- ✓ What are some valuable traits to have if doing CAT?
- ✓ How do you prepare for CAT?
- ✓ How do you involve others in CAT?
- ✓ What are the dos and don’ts of CAT?
- ✓ If there is CAT, is there also Culturally *In*appropriate Training (CIT)?
- ✓ Do you have any remaining questions regarding CAT?

CAT – what is it?

So, finally we get to our discussion about CAT itself – but what exactly is CAT? Here are some good, “working” definitions of CAT. The first is from Australia and is regarding their Aboriginal persons, whereas the others are from the National Library of Medicine (NLM). CAT is...

- ✓ “...developed and delivered in a way that takes account of a learner’s cultural background and needs.” – Australian National Training Authority (ANTA)
- ✓ “...based in the traditional and cultural values of (Aboriginal) people.” – NLM
- ✓ “...adapted and presented in a way which is both understandable and respectful of cultural diversity.” – NLM

What are some valuable traits to have?

If you are going to develop and/or deliver CAT, here are some valuable traits to have. These come from Terence Brake of Transnational Management Associates, Ltd. (TMA) at www.tmaworld.com.

- ✓ Adaptability

- ✓ Cooperation
- ✓ Curiosity and...
- ✓ ...Learning
- ✓ Empathy
- ✓ Friendliness
- ✓ Objectivity
- ✓ Patience
- ✓ “Perspectiveness”
- ✓ Resilience
- ✓ Self-Awareness

How do you prepare for CAT?

Finally getting prepared to develop and/or deliver some CAT – how should you prepare for it? Here are some ways to start.

- ✓ Learn – as much as you can about the culture
- ✓ Ask – permission/if ok to do CAT
- ✓ Buy-in – get it from respected members (e.g., tribal elders)
- ✓ Survey – both the trainees and stakeholders
- ✓ Involve – the persons of culture
- ✓ Embrace – their culture (as appropriate)
- ✓ Empathy – “Walk a mile in their shoes”

Involving others – how do you do it?

Clearly the most important aspect of CAT is involvement of the cultural group or individuals. Here are some ways to go about it.

- ✓ Get buy-in from respected members of their culture (e.g., tribal elders).
- ✓ Have them help develop various training approaches and methods.
- ✓ Have them deliver the training as co-trainers or as the sole trainers (without you).
- ✓ Use surveys of both the trainees and stakeholders.
- ✓ Approach trainees just before class. At the least you can do this, but not as a substitute for any of the above.

What are the “dos” of CAT?

Obviously there are things that a trainer can and should do when doing CAT. Here’s a list of some common ones.

- ✓ Be prepared
- ✓ Involve them
- ✓ Show respect
- ✓ Learn their culture
- ✓ It their way
- ✓ Give them ownership of it
- ✓ Your research/HW
- ✓ Ask questions

What are the “don’ts” of CAT?

Where there are dos, it follows there are also don'ts – and there are. As is typical, the don'ts are even more important than the dos. Just think, when things go badly, they often go very badly. Here are some don'ts that you really want to avoid. Don't...

- ✓ Use clichés!
- ✓ Be condescending!
- ✓ Make jokes!
- ✓ Do it your way!
- ✓ Use pop culture references!
- ✓ Assume!
- ✓ Pretend to be “them”!
- ✓ Give up!

There are various other ones that are specific to various cultures (e.g., Latino, Chinese, Native Tribes, etc.).

Is there “Culturally *In*appropriate Training” (CIT)?

So, if there is culturally appropriate training (CAT), is there also the reciprocal – culturally *in*appropriate training (CIT)? Sure, of course there is – but let's hope that collectively none of ever experience it – either giving or receiving. There are a couple of general points to consider.

It is absolutely more important what *not* to do! Review the don'ts listed above. Then review them again. Consider if there are any other don'ts you can think of. Then be sure to avoid them at all costs – which brings us to the second point.

It only takes one innocent faux pas to undo much goodwill. It takes a lot of hard work, patience, etc. to make gains in developing trust with others of a different cultural group. But all it takes is one relatively innocent slip of the tongue, physical slight, etc. to lose that hard-earned trust. Try not to do so.

My own mistake – a case study

Many years ago I was doing some Asbestos Supervisor training for a Native Tribe. We had worked most of the day building a polyethylene sheeting containment and decontamination facility. We had worked outside in the sun in July – it was hot – especially in the poly containment. Everyone was hot and tired. We went inside where it was a bit cooler (but no A/C) to do our hands-on session on donning PPE including disposable suits. In spite of XL suits they did not fit everyone. A taller student was having some trouble donning his suit.

In an effort to try to encourage him I made an unfortunate reference to trying to also help my young son. Immediately he got mad, pushed me aside, and stormed out. You see, Natives were often treated as and compared to children. Clearly not my intent, but a huge gaffe never-the-less. We took a break of course. I found my contact person and explained my mistake and took responsibility for it.

The next day back in the classroom I explained and apologized to the entire class and specifically to the student offended by my remark. I shared with them my own experiences being taunted as a child for being Jewish. Having something of a common bond helped get us past our differences. To this day I still provide their refresher training each year.

A great quote on culture

It's always nice to have something profound to say at the close of an article or training – CAT or otherwise. So here's a great quote from someone else on culture (and by extension on CAT). See if you can guess who said the following.

“If we are to achieve a richer culture, rich in contrasting values, we must recognize the whole gamut of human potentialities, and so weave a less arbitrary social fabric, one in which each diverse human gift will find a fitting place.”

Are you able to guess who said it? Here are some hints if you need them:

- ✓ It was said by a woman
- ✓ She studied many different cultural groups
- ✓ She was an author – her first major work was “Coming of Age in Samoa”
- ✓ She was not only an anthropologist, but also a cultural anthropologist
- ✓ She was an expert on culture (of course) and quite likely CAT, too
- ✓ She lived from 1901 to 1978

Did you figure it out – hope so! It was anthropologist, author, and culture expert...
...Margaret Mead (of course – who else could it be?)

Any remaining questions?

Hopefully this has been helpful in giving you a foundation in CAT. There is always more we could discuss, but this will have to be it for now. However, if you, the reader, have any other questions, please feel free to contact me.

Thanks, and good training!