

Switching Cultural Codes

by Andy Molinsky

Born and raised in India, Partha brought strong academic skills and an outgoing personality to the MBA program at the Brandeis International Business School in Waltham, Massachusetts. But despite these strengths, the information technology consultant faced a major stumbling block at the end of his first year: He struggled to promote himself to potential employers at career fairs and networking events.

In India, humility is seen as a great virtue, and self-promotion is considered immodest, Partha explains. “We were taught to use ‘we’ instead of ‘I,’” he says. Because of his background, networking in the U.S. was a “bad experience,” he adds. “All I wanted was to leave the room.”

I have changed Partha’s name—as well as the names of other students mentioned in this article—to protect his privacy, but I’ve found that his story is far from unique. As more students leave their native countries to work and study in other parts of the world, they are sure to find themselves in situations where another culture’s expectations come into conflict with their own.

To help students develop cultural fluency, I created a training program, offered for the first time in the spring of 2008, as part of my MBA elective course, “Managing Across Cultures.” The course includes a combination of case studies, role-playing exercises, video clips, simulations, and other interactive classroom activities.

Different cultural expectations can place business students in uncomfortable situations. By learning to “switch” behaviors, they can adapt more successfully to another country’s value system while staying true to their own.



I believe it's critical to help all business students become comfortable adapting to different cultural environments—to develop a skill I call “cross-cultural code-switching.” Through “Managing Across Cultures,” I aim to help students develop the skills and courage they need to adopt new behaviors to suit different cultural norms.

More Than “Etiquette”

When I say students need to develop “cultural fluency,” I mean they need to do more than learn simple differences in cultural etiquette. Westerners, for example, can learn quickly how to accept a business card in Japan: Bow, accept the card with both hands, and refrain from immediately putting it in a pocket. It's a ritual that's easy to learn and does not conflict with most people's values or beliefs.

But some situations pose greater culturally driven psychological and emotional challenges for many students. Activities that Western students take for granted—such as debating a point in the classroom—can send many Asian students, who have been taught to keep their opinions to themselves, into a moral tailspin. “Managing Across Cultures” is designed to help students develop the coping skills they need to handle the cultural demands presented by these situations.

At the beginning of the course, students each choose to focus on a particular cross-cultural code-switching situation—it could be a professional activity such as interviewing and networking, an academic activity such as participating in class or making formal presentations, or a social activity such as engaging in an informal conversation. The situation, however, must meet three criteria: It must call for behavioral norms different from those expected in the student's native culture; it must call for behavioral norms that make the student uncomfortable because they conflict with his or her values and beliefs; and, finally, it must be meaningful, so that the student has a stake in handling it well.

American-born students choose situations that they might encounter in a variety of countries. Without exception, students from outside the U.S. choose American cultural situations, because these are both immediate and relevant to

their experiences in their coursework and job searches.

For example, this past semester, Jorg, a Swiss MBA student, focused on American-style small talk, which, from his cultural perspective, felt unnecessary and too personally intrusive. Even so, he realized that engaging in small talk would be critical to his success after graduation, when he planned to work on establishing social networks as a venture capitalist in the life sciences. Natasha, a Russian MBA candidate, focused on proactively asking her boss for additional assignments during her semesterlong internship, when such behavior conflicted with her beliefs about interacting within a hierarchy.

Thao, a Fulbright scholar from Vietnam, focused on class participation. The intense interpersonal conflicts that arose during MBA classroom discussions made her particularly uncomfortable, she explains, because “Vietnamese culture highly values social harmony.” Defending one's own point of view in public is considered a taboo in most Asian countries, especially in Vietnam. When she did try to speak, she recalls that the words got stuck in her throat and her face turned red with embarrassment. “I just couldn't look my professor or my classmates in the eyes,” Thao says. “I wished I could turn invisible.”



Professor Molinsky works with a student from India in his course “Managing Across Cultures.”

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During the semester, Thao, Jorg, Natasha, and their classmates learned to overcome the challenges presented by their chosen situations. More important, they also acquired code-switching skills that they could apply to other emotionally demanding cross-cultural situations.

A Four-Step Process

The training program incorporates a four-step process to help students learn how to code-switch effectively. The process includes opportunities for students to *diagnose* the rules for a cultural situation, *practice* playing by those rules in real-world situations, *reflect* on what they have learned, and receive *feedback* on their progress.

Diagnosis. Students first work with a team of native-born cultural experts to diagnose the content and style of behavior expected in their switching situations. By working through a set of custom exercises, students also learn to distinguish what I call the “zone of appropriateness”—the culturally acceptable range of content and style permissible in a particular cultural script.

For example, to learn the appropriate style for making small talk during an American interview, Jorg practiced adopting a positive, upbeat manner, while simultaneously being polite and deferential toward the interviewer. He had to avoid seeming overly positive (displaying an exaggerated smile or using a high-pitched tone) or overly deferential (bowing or failing to make eye contact). While either of these extremes might be consistent with the expectations of some cultures, they would fall outside the zone of appropriateness for this situation in the U.S.

In this stage, students are able to demystify the situation and reduce their stress levels. Once students become comfortable in the “zone,” they learn to vary the cultural script in ways that allow them to express their own personalities and styles, while staying within the limits of expected behaviors.

Practice. Next, students embark on cultural code-switching missions to practice what they have learned. They are required to switch their behaviors in real-world situations at least three times in a five-week period. Students approach potential employers at career fairs, make small talk with strangers, and interview for actual jobs. For students in my spring 2008 class, some situations were planned, such as scheduled job interviews; others were impromptu, such as networking during an elevator ride with company representatives at a field site.

Reflection. Since the stakes and situations are real, students fully experience the psychological challenges provoked by switching, including uncomfortable emotions

such as guilt and shame. So that students can learn from these intense interactions without becoming overwhelmed, I establish a safe classroom environment where they can share their experiences with their peers.

Students also are required to write about their switching experiences immediately after each attempt, using a structured set of exercises designed to help them process their emotions and make sense of their experiences. Students document how much the new cultural rules conflict with their own values, how difficult it is for them to make the switch, and what emotions they feel during the experience.

For example, when asked to provide an analogy between his chosen cultural situation and another familiar activity, Partha contrasted his networking experience with his yoga practice. “Yoga makes me feel in harmony with myself, the environment, and the surroundings,” he wrote, “while every time I try to switch I feel that I am performing a sin, trying to become something that I am not.”

For the same exercise, Jorg wrote that Swiss-style small talk was like being in a boat on the Charles River—it goes steadily in one direction at a relaxing speed. American small talk, on the other hand, was more erratic, like “being on a boat in a stormy lake. The waves are high and come fast, one after the other. I don’t have control over the waves; I just try to follow them as well as possible. The direction the boat takes is unpredictable.”

The reflection stage allows students to process their emotions and identify the unique strategies they use to cope with their emotions before, during, and after each switch. Some of my students noted that they detached from their emotions, pretending that they were acting in a play, while others found ways to forcibly suppress their emotions. Still others injected their personalities into new cultural codes while still acting within the zone of appropriateness.

Ben, an American MBA candidate, chose to interview at a Chinese firm that operated in Boston. Although Ben had worked for several years in China and spoke fluent Mandarin, he experienced great discomfort when he had to promote himself in a way that suited the Chinese emphasis on the collective, rather than on the individual. “In Chinese culture, it is very important to be part of the organization rather than the all-star employee,” Ben says. “The interviewer is looking to see if the interviewee can become ‘part of the machine.’” That emphasis came into direct conflict with Ben’s values. “Showing how I can be a ‘part of the machine’ is not something I aspire to,” he says.

Ben’s solution was to strike a balance: “I was more individualistic than what would be expected from a Chinese

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interviewee, but I was sure not to show too much individualism,” he says. In that way, he stayed within the zone of appropriateness for Chinese culture, while staying true to his own values.

Feedback. Near the end of this process, a native-born cultural expert observes each student during a final switching attempt and offers a performance review. The student then completes a self-diagnosis for the same situation and compares his or her impressions with those of the native observer.

This review allows students to see how far their code-switching skills and competence have progressed. In Ben’s case, for example, the native Chinese interviewer confirmed Ben’s own impressions—that his behavior was appropriate for Chinese cultural standards and that his strategy was successful.

Switching Perspectives

Throughout the course, the training is framed as a learning process rather than as a performance task. Whether or not students fully succeed in their switching attempts does not affect their final grades. Instead, their grades are determined by the thoughtfulness and thoroughness of their responses to written exercises.

During this process, students’ real-life switching attempts help them to anticipate their value conflicts. The course emphasizes the management of emotions that impede cross-cultural code-switching. Indeed, for many, the strong emotions lessen with practice, or even change from negative to positive.

Midway through the semester, Jorg was becoming much more comfortable making his small-talk switch. “This time the sea wasn’t calmer, but I was,” he wrote. “I actually didn’t care where the waves took the boat and even ended up enjoying the excitement of it.” By the end of the semester, Jorg noted that, while he still enjoyed the Swiss’ more relaxing approach to small talk, he was now better able to navigate American waters. “I feel more comfortable now with the stormy sea,” he says. “Sometimes, I even create some waves myself, by rapidly changing the subject of conversation.”


Other students come to revel in their new skills. For example, after diagnosing the code and practicing several times, Thao lost her anxiety and began actually to enjoy speaking up in class. “My heart was again racing like a horse, but this time it was because of eagerness, not fear,” she says. “I felt the urge to speak up and could not wait for others to finish talking.”



A student from Afghanistan practices behaviors within the “zone of appropriateness” for a typical American interaction before trying them out in a real-world setting.

Sandeep, an Indian MBA student, remarked that his confidence at small talk had skyrocketed after he completed the course, because he was now able to break the code into distinct “scientific” parts. “It’s almost become addictive,” he says. Now, Sandeep enjoys the challenge of seeing how often he can walk up to people and just “start talking.”

I believe that simulations have their place, but when it comes to cultural code-switching, they don’t have the same sense of immediacy—or produce the same positive results—as real-world situations. This training program allows individuals to confront their emotions, conquer their fears, and develop and test skills in real contexts. At the same time, it provides the psychological safety of a supportive classroom context to which students can retreat following their often highly stressful attempts to switch behaviors.

After all, the earlier our business students build their cultural fluency, the better. Such fluency can make a positive difference in their experiences—and academic success—early on in an MBA program. Moreover, it better prepares them to work, learn, and live in the global economy. 

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