

Grow up and play games! Simulation in an Intercultural Learning Design

We grow up learning at play the skills we need for life, both alone and with other children. Then at a certain point we “grow up” and “stop playing games.” Both phrases not only seem to describe the passage to adulthood, but become psychologically negative admonitions in our mouths. “Grow up!” means, “Be serious, stop your childish ways of demanding things and attention,” while, “Stop playing games” suggests a condemnation of everything from harboring hidden agendas to outright dishonest manipulative behavior. We play a lame shame game to protect name and fame from accusations of frivolity.

Some years ago, in the midst of intense urban ethnic conflict, a colleague of mine was conducting *Star Power*, a large scale simulation game. It aimed at raising awareness of the dynamics of racial crisis and bringing about the kind of dialogue that might lead to a better resolution than calling in the military to restore order. At the height of the simulated conflict, one of the participants ran up to my facilitating friend and started to choke him. With remaining breath he squeaked out, “Game’s over!” at which point the aggrieved assailant relaxed his grip and the rage drained away.

Good games simulate reality. Reality is messy, chancy, full of the unexpected, often tense and stressful, forcing us to change our act if we are going to succeed. In other words, reality is a game without a safety valve. There is no one to shout, “Game’s over!” That’s why the virtual reality of games can help us safely explore many things in living and working with cultural diversity that in real time would prove hard to fathom, let alone resolve.

Games set up an alternative reality by presenting a set of rules of play. We leave the real world to enter the make-believe world where we are less constrained by the consequences of our behavior and our choices, and we can learn from them as well as freely reflect on how we performed. The power and the joy of learning through games derive from the presence of four elements of play that occur naturally in almost all cultures.¹

- **ΑΓΩΝ** the classical Greek root of our word “agony”—how we feel when giving our best effort, struggling against the odds, entering the “home stretch,” or “hitting the wall.”
- **ALEA** the sense of unpredictability, chance, not knowing what will happen next—“the luck of the draw,” “the roll of the dice.” (*Alea* was the Roman word for a game of dice.)
- **VERTIGO** disorienting the mind & senses, “topsy-turvy,” losing the normal frame of reference, our customary bearings.
- **MIMOS** miming, imitation, entering another's reality, playing a new role, “walking a mile in someone else's shoes.”

The stimulation and learnings of a game, strong in these elements, is rarely forgotten. So it is the task of the intercultural gamewright to build them into the experiences offered to learners and sojourners. The authors have tried to build them into one of the simplest of games, partly a quiz, a set of cards containing questions, situations, risks and discourse as they come to a person in a new cultural environment, with little warning or predictability, but from every direction.

¹ These four game elements were first identified by the French psychological anthropologist Roger Caillois (1913-1978), in *Les Jeux et les Hommes: le masque et le vertige* (Gallimard, 1967). They were recently described in detail in Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. (Harper, 1990).

Hence, **diversophy**® a collection of factoids, critical choices, risks, wisdom and reflective questions played by anywhere from three to eight people around a table taking turns, picking up a card and facing the challenge, as in life, to whatever has come their way.

The card categories are named to fit the challenge: **diversiSMARTS** cards test one's factual knowledge about a culture, **diversiCHOICE** ask us to pick a course of appropriate behavior in our new cultural setting, while **diversiRISK** cards subject us to surprise happenings in an unfamiliar context, some positive surprises, and others disappointing results from our behavior or mere presence in alien surroundings. **diversiGUIDE** cards give us wisdom from the new culture itself and those who have fathomed it well, while **diversiSHARE** cards ask us to compare the new culture' and approaches to everyday human situations with what we were raised to believe or do.

diversiRISK 

Coming from what was once a colonial culture, you sense that your looks and accent make it harder for people in the headquarters of your organization to take seriously what you have to say.

Think this over and share your thoughts before taking your next turn. Discard this card.

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diversiSHARE 

How close is too close? How far is too far? Stand up and pick a person from your team whom you feel is quite different from you in several ways. Stand about two arm lengths apart. Then, while the other person stands still, walk slowly toward him or her until you feel you are at a comfortable conversational distance. Stop there. Then ask the other person to adjust to the distance that feels comfortable to him or her.

When you are done, any teammates who wish to try the exercise with each other may do so. Keep this card.

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diversiGUIDE 

"Values are like fingerprints. Nobody's are the same, but you leave 'em all over everything you do."

Elvis Presley (1935-1977), US pop singer

After you read this card aloud, any team member, including you, may comment on how it can add to our sense of cultural competence. Keep this card.

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Q **diversiSMARTS** 

One of the most effective ways to benefit groups that are being treated unfairly is to make those you feel are speaking or behaving unfairly feel guilty about what is happening.

True or False?

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A **diversiSMARTS** 

False. This often used strategy usually backfires. Guilt can make people respond in the short term, but in time they are likely to turn against the victim or those who point the finger of guilt against them. Help everyone understand the key issues and their impact on the group, their role in the dynamic, and how they can collaborate.

If you chose the correct answer, keep this card. If not, discard it.

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<p>Q diversiCHOICE </p> <p>Doing what you can do as a manager to lessen the stress on individuals and groups under your supervision is likely to reduce ethnic and cultural tensions as well, even if the stress is unrelated to cultural issues:</p> <p>True or False?</p> <p>3 Points <small>©2022 GSI. All rights reserved. www.diversophy.com</small> CC-EN-0003</p>	<p>A diversiCHOICE </p> <p>True. Under stress individuals tend to revert to their earliest learned values and survival behaviors. Their tolerance for people different from them is reduced and they are often likely to accuse or blame these people for the discomfort they are currently experiencing.</p> <p><i>If you chose the better answer, keep this card. If not, discard it.</i></p> <p>3 Points <small>©2022 GSI. All rights reserved. www.diversophy.com</small> CC-EN-0003</p>
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Being thrust into a new culture without some orientation to its differing haphazardness can feel like being hit in the face with a wet diaper. Developing **diversophy**[®] (wisdom about differences) in a playful way can save us some stink and mess as we try to cope with work and life away from home.

There are many intercultural simulations and games that beckon us from the familiar to familiarization. **diversophy**[®] is but one. As Shunryu Suzuki-Roshi remarked, "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few."² Why cite a Zen master in a playground? Simply because leaving real time and entering playtime is one of the easiest paths to enlightenment about reality. Play and simulation allow us to enter the dance of a culture as an unfolding drama rather than letting it enfold us as brutish karma. It should not surprise us that theater originated in religious contexts and that play remains a sacred space we can enter together. Aw, com'on out and play!

² *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, 1973