

## **BARNGA Overview and Framing Material**

### **Overview**

BARNGA is a simulation game that encourages participants to critically consider normative assumptions and cross-cultural communication. It was created by Sivasailam “Thiagi” Thiagarajan in 1980, while working for USAID in Gbarnga, Liberia. He and his colleagues were trying to play Euchre but all came away from the instructions with different interpretations. He had an ‘A-ha’ moment that conflict arises not (only) from major or obvious cultural differences but often from subtle, minor cues. He created the game to tease out these subtleties. In this activity, students play a card game silently, each operating with a different set of rules, unbeknownst to them.

### **Goals**

- To learn to communicate effectively across cultural groups
- To help students interrogate assumptions they may have about group norms and critically analyze where those norms have come from and whether or not they continue to be useful in new contexts.
- To understand what happens when we are not utilizing the same “rules” or “norms” as others in the group.
- To interrogate what the role of communication is in helping us either be confused or understand one another.

### **Implementation**

This exercise is best implemented early in the semester when students are first learning how to communicate effectively with one another and what happens when that communication breaks down. It’s also effective for first year seminar courses with students who are transitioning to the university with new norms and rules than where they came from. Finally, this is great for building intercultural awareness. We tend to make a lot of assumptions about other groups based on our own norms.

### **Challenges**

- The game is complicated. For a visual example of how the game is played in a classroom, please view this video [link].
- The game will require most of a class period (roughly 45 minute to an hour) for students to complete and debrief.
- Consider the special restrictions of your class. BARNGA will require that students be able to move around and sit around tables or clusters of desks. It won’t likely be a doable activity in lecture halls.
- Students with disabilities that affect their ability to move around the room or hold cards may have difficulty taking part in this activity.

### **Other Associated Material**

- Tournament Guidesheet and Discussion Guidesheet [link]

Sivasailam “Thiagi” Thiagarajan with Raja Thiagarajan, *Barnga: A Simulation Game on Cultural Clashes*, Boston: Intercultural Press, 2006.

Resource hosted by LSA Inclusive Teaching Initiative, University of Michigan (<http://sites.lsa.umich.edu/inclusive-teaching/>).

- Gamerules [link]
- BARNGA video

### Citations

Sivasailam “Thiagi” Thiagarajan with Raja Thiagarajan, *Barnga: A Simulation Game on Cultural Clashes*, Boston: Intercultural Press, 2006

Resource hosted by LSA Inclusive Teaching Initiative, University of Michigan (<http://sites.lsa.umich.edu/inclusive-teaching/>).

## BARNGA Facilitator Guide Resource

### Set up:

Place the following on each table of 4-5 students

- Cards: one “deck” includes Ace, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7. All other cards are removed
- Table Tents with the table number on each
- Rules Sheets [link]--all on one color of paper
- Tournament Guidesheets [link] on another color of paper
- Scrap paper/Index cards
- Pens

### Timing:

0:00-0:05	Introduction and Set-Up
0:05-0:30	Simulation, including Practice
0:30-0:35	Debrief (Getting Started)
0:35-0:45	Debrief (Descriptive)
0:45-1:05	Debrief (Applied)
1:05-1:10	Debrief (Take-Aways)
1:10-1:15	Closing Comments

### Agenda

#### 0:00-0:05 Introduction and Set-Up

- State Learning Goals for the session:
  - Use simulation to have fun but deals with a serious purpose
  - Learn to communicate effectively
  - Learning to work well in a cross-cultural group
- Introduction of BARNGA, tell your students:
  - Simulation called BARNGA-- comes from a West African Town by the same name.

Sivasailam “Thiagi” Thiagarajan with Raja Thiagarajan, *Barnga: A Simulation Game on Cultural Clashes*, Boston: Intercultural Press, 2006.

Resource hosted by LSA Inclusive Teaching Initiative, University of Michigan (<http://sites.lsa.umich.edu/inclusive-teaching/>).

- You will form small groups and receive some rules for an easy card game that no one has played before. You'll get a few minutes to study rules and practice playing at your table.
- Then the rules will be taken away and from that moment on--there will be no verbal communication--That is, NO SPEAKING, NO WRITING, AND NO SIGNING OF WORDS! Instructors will enforce!!
- A tournament will begin (you have rules) and people will move from table to table
- After a few rounds, we will discuss what happened.

### **0:05-0:30                      Simulation, including Practice**

- Ask students to form groups of 4-6
- Reiterate rules again:
  - You have 5 minutes to study the rules and practice 5 tricks.
  - The rules will then be taken away and NO verbal communication will be allowed. You may gesture or draw pictures (NO WORDS!!) but you cannot speak, sign or write words.
  - The tournament will begin and you'll have a few minutes to play at your home table in silence.
  - Tournament scoring is explained on the guidesheet.
  - Each round will last a few minutes and at the end of each round players should move as outlined on the tournament guidesheet.
- Give them time to review the rule sheets ("Five Tricks")
  - Have them take "five tricks" rules from under table tents, look them over and then begin practicing. Have them try to deal the cards out while they are looking over the rules.
  - After 2-3 minutes or so of practicing, collect rules. Don't make big deal of this just say it's time to start playing and they no longer get to have the rules.
- Announce the start of the tournament
  - Continue to say to them that they keep score as explained on the blue sheet (don't respond if they ask for your interpretation of the blue sheet—simply politely say to read the blue sheet—they get to keep this sheet throughout).
  - REMIND and reinforce -- NO VERBAL Communication
  - End round one after 5 minutes
  - Hold 3 or 4 rounds, but don't tell them--just end after 4
- Announce End of Tournament

### **0:30-0:35                      Debrief (Getting Started)**

- Come to circle set up:

- Don't let them start talking about until you have them calmed down. Many students may be frustrated, others will be laughing and wanting to share but explain that we want to hear everyone so hold your thoughts.
- Explain what debriefing is:
  - A time to discover together what happened and what it all means. Examine all the pieces of this puzzle...takes everyone to participate.
  - Gives a chance to reflect about a common experience (BARNGA).
  - Help to make the discussion as rich as possible need to help each other and collectively learn from one another.

### **0:35-0:45                      First Phase of Debrief (Descriptive)**

- What was going through your mind when...?
  - (a) BARNGA was introduced
  - (b) when first began card game
  - (c) rules taken away
  - (d) when had to move
  - (e) when playing with those from other tables...
- Did what you were thinking and feeling change during play?
- What were your greatest successes and frustrations?
  - If RULES come up, press for other frustrations, too.

### **0:45-1:05                      Second Phase of Debrief (Applied)**

- We've mentioned several major problems that arose during the game:
  - Each group did your best, but all had different set of circumstances and ground rules.
  - Most discovered different rules but didn't know exactly how they were different.
  - Even if you knew, not clear how to bridge differences.
  - Communicating with others is difficult and requires sensitivity and creativity.
  - When the differences are hidden or few, may even be more difficult to resolve them than if they were many and obvious.
  - In spite of many similarities, people have differences in the way they do things...you have to understand and reconcile those differences in order to function effectively in a group.
  - ASK - What were other problems that arose during playing the game?
- In groups of three:
  - Take 10 minutes to answer the following questions...
    - What specific "real-life" situations does BARNGA simulate?
    - What does the simulation suggest about what to do when you are in this situation in the "real world?"
    - What were the underlying causes of the problems which arose in this session?

- Have you ever had an experience where there was a rule difference that you didn't know about? How did your view of things change once you became aware of it? In retrospect, how would you do things differently if you knew in this game?
- When are you all likely to encounter situations in the real world like BARNGA? What would you like to have happen when you next experience 'rule' differences? How will you increase the likelihood of having a positive experience?
- Full Group:
  - Share out from small group conversations.
    - What interesting things did you discuss? What was surprising?
    - What did you think the simulation suggests about the "real world"?
    - What do you think the simulation teaches us about communication and conflict?
  - Ask - How is BARNGA related to this course??

### **1:05-1:10                    Third Phase of Debrief (Take-Aways)**

- On index card, please write one important thing you learned from Barnga today.
- Collect cards and re-distribute them randomly.
- Go-around -- Ask everyone to read out loud the card they now have.

### **1:10-1:15                    Closing Comments from Facilitators**

- Synthesize discussion
- Emphasize desired take-aways and applicability to course