

Overview:

The goal of this activity is to help participants understand cultural differences in the organization of space. It is inspired by Edward T. Hall's concept of proxemics, which is the study of how humans use space and includes not only how we communicate spatially (for example, how big we prefer our personal bubbles to be in face to face interactions) but also how we organize the space around us according to cultural values (for instance, what it says about your position in an organization if you have a cubicle or a corner office). During this activity, participants will be asked to draw a floor plan of a house based on their own experiences and understandings of how houses are typically arranged. They will then compare their floor plans and discuss the differences between them.

Note: This activity works best in culturally heterogeneous groups because there will be more differences between floor plans. However, the activity can be performed with a more homogeneous group if the instructor provides some examples to demonstrate cultural differences between floor plans.

Objectives:

As a result of this activity, participants will be able to:

1. Compare and contrast features of houses around the world.
2. Articulate how and why cultures organize spaces, such as homes, differently.
3. Consider when and how to adapt to different spaces.

Time:

20 minutes

Group Size:

Pairs

Materials:

Paper and writing utensils for each participant.

Intercultural Development Continuum Stages:

- Denial
- Polarization
- Minimization

AAC&U Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Goals:

Cultural Self-Awareness:

- To articulate insights into own cultural rules and biases (e.g., seeking complexity; aware of how their experiences have shaped these rules, and how to recognize and respond to cultural biases, resulting in a shift in self-description).

Knowledge of Cultural Worldview Frameworks:

- To demonstrate sophisticated understanding of the complexity of elements important to members of another culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, or beliefs & practices.

Activity instructions:

1. Ensure that each participant has paper and a writing utensil. Tell them that they have five minutes to draw a floor plan of a house. The floor plans should be as detailed as possible and include the following:
 - Entrances
 - Furniture
 - Labels on rooms with particular functions and a brief explanation of what people do in them
2. Ask learners to pair up or talk in small groups to compare and contrast their drawings. Alternatively, if you have the space, you can ask participants to display drawings on walls or tables and they can wander around poster/cocktail party style to analyze similarities and differences.
3. The facilitator should then bring the entire group back together and debrief with the following questions:
 - What are the similarities that you saw in the drawings?
 - What are the differences that you noticed?
Note: With a homogenous group, the instructor will need to provide contrasting examples of home designs from other parts of the world, or perhaps domestically but featuring urban vs rural contrasts or differences by income level. See examples in the ppt slides available for download. With this approach, be careful not to exoticize or otherize contrasting examples, portraying them as weird as opposed to the students' "normal".
4. Moving beyond debriefing of small group discussions, the whole group dialogue should then further explore implications of these similarities and differences in cultural patterns of organizing space. If you have a group that is large and you want more learners to participate, you could split them back into small groups to discuss the questions below (either all groups discuss each question, or each group discusses one) and then return to large group for debriefing.
 - What sorts of conclusions can we draw about behaviors/norms/values in our culture that influence how we shape the space/environments around us (for example, the Chinese practice of Feng shui, or the propensity toward hiding or displaying things)? What does that say about our values as a society? Do we value aesthetic appearance or the functionality?
 - What about the impact of availability of space – what influences do you see of population density in the drawings?
 - How do changing values and practices in society affect the styles of houses over time?
Note: If all participants are younger and have not yet experienced living in different styles of houses, the facilitator should provide an example, like the following: "Prior to the 1960s, entertaining areas in US middleclass and wealthy homes were divided from

- kitchen areas because meals/guests were separated from the act of cooking. However, people now prefer more open concept homes because a part of entertaining in “foodie” cultures involves cooking together. Nowadays, renovating older homes often involves tearing out walls and adding a counter between the kitchen and dining room.”
- What is it like to enter a person's home that is arranged differently to what we're used to? How do you adapt and figure out what is expected of you? What should you be looking for? How can you politely ask questions to figure out what is acceptable in that space?

Related Tools:

- [Sounds and Silence](#)
- [Sounds Like Silence](#)
- [Speak Without Speaking](#)