Questions Across Cultures Lesson Plan

Introduction:
We often hail curiosity in getting to know culturally different others as an interculturally competent trait, but not many tools exist to help develop skills for deploying curiosity appropriately. This activity dives into the inner workings of curiosity. Participants will be challenged to reflect on their embodied experiences of acting on curiosity with culturally different others and to imagine possible approaches to satisfying curiosity that balance their own desire for learning with the rights and needs of others.

Objectives:
As a result of this activity, participants will be able to:
1. Evaluate their own comfort level with asking questions about cultural differences.
2. Develop strategies for asking cultural questions that are effective, appropriate, and satisfactory.

Time:
90-120 minutes.

Group Size:
Small group.

Materials:
Questions Across Cultures Handout and computer with access to the internet for presenting slides (both in Downloads).

Intercultural Development Continuum Stages:
- Polarization
- Minimization
- Acceptance
- Adaptation

AAC&U Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Goals:
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.

Verbal and Nonverbal Communication
- To articulate a complex understanding of cultural differences in verbal and nonverbal communication (e.g., demonstrates understanding of the degree to which people use physical contact while communicating in different cultures or use direct/indirect and explicit/implicit meanings).
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- To skillfully negotiate a shared understanding based on these differences.

Curiosity
- To ask complex questions about other cultures.
- To seek out and articulate answers to these questions that reflect multiple cultural perspectives.

Other Skills:
Friendship; Teamwork; Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion.

Activity Instructions:
1. Begin with a group discussion about curiosity:
   - How do you understand and define curiosity?
   - Is curiosity always positive? When could curiosity be negative?
   - Why do we ask questions of others? What is the purpose of questions?
   - How do you feel when questions are asked of you about identities with which you identify (e.g., ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality)? What contextual factors are important when evaluating how you feel about these questions? Does how you feel change based on how or why the questions are asked?

2. Define curiosity as per the AAC&U rubric: “To ask complex questions about other cultures. To seek out and articulate answers to these questions that reflect multiple cultural perspectives.” Engage the group in the following discussion questions:
   - What do you think about this definition? Would you add/subtract/modify anything? How useful is it for intercultural learning?
   - What does cultural curiosity have in common with scientific or artistic curiosity? How important is curiosity to your discipline? Why is curiosity not only an important mindset for interacting across cultures, but also key to career skills?

   *Mention to participants that we often speak of curiosity as a positive trait we are working to grow in (as per the AAC&U rubric). Ask participants:

   - In what ways are motives and curiosity related? Can curiosity have negative motives? What is an appropriate motive in your opinion? What is an inappropriate motive? Can curiosity do damage even when motives are pure?

3. Watch a YouTube clip or display a meme that illustrates an intercultural interaction in which an inappropriate question is asked. Examples below:
   - Real Things White People Have Said to Me https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ZkphjQUvzc
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- “Oh you’re from Egypt? Did you live in a pyramid?”
  [http://www.quickmeme.com/meme/3r59c4](http://www.quickmeme.com/meme/3r59c4)
- RACISM | DUMB QUESTIONS PEOPLE ASK BLACK MUSLIMS
  [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Mt0YTGzMrQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Mt0YTGzMrQ)
- Ridiculous Questions White People Ask African people In Europe | You Will Not Believe Your Ears!
  [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4amKKUmXNkl&t=1s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4amKKUmXNkl&t=1s)

4. Introduce the questions listed below (adapted from activities listed in Related Tools). Ask participants to read over the questions.

- What is the story behind your name?
- What are you interested in that most outsiders to your culture haven’t heard of?
- What are you most looking forward to in the next 10 years? Are there cultural milestones that are expected of you? If so, which ones?
- When do you feel truly alive? Does your culture approve of this?
- What are three interesting facts about you that make you stand out as different from others in your cultural group?
- How many and which languages are you able to communicate in? Is multilingualism common where you are from?
- What is your favorite book/movie/tv show/song? Is this popular in your community?
- What would your last meal on Earth be? Is this meal closely associated with your culture? If so, how?

5. Ask participants to consider the above questions within the context of the YouTube video/meme reviewed earlier in the activity, making note of their personal feelings, thoughts, observations, questions, etc.

6. Engage participants in a discussion comparing and contrasting the question(s) from the initial YouTube clip/meme and the questions listed in Activity Instruction #4. You can ask the following questions (or any additional and relevant questions) as the discussion unfolds:

- What differences/similarities/themes among questions do you notice?
- What do you notice about the tone of the questions? How would you read the questions out loud?
- What do you notice about the language used in the questions?
- What role does power play in the questions? Is there implied power in the questions? How so?
- Does the question-asker ask the question as if they have the right to know something?
- Does the question-asker already possess the insight or knowledge they are asking about? Are they simply confirming what they think they know?
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- Are there any offensive assumptions/implied stereotypes present in the questions? Where?

7. Ask participants to think of a time they've been asked an inappropriate question. How did they feel? What made the question inappropriate? Ask participants to then think of a time they've asked an inappropriate question. What led them to ask this question? What was at the heart of their question? How would they approach the situation differently as the question-asker?

8. Ask participants to rate themselves from 1-10 on how comfortable they are interacting with people culturally different from them, with 1 being extremely uncomfortable and 10 being extremely comfortable. They do not need to share their number, unless they would like to.

9. Ask participants what they believe the cause of comfort/discomfort felt in cross-cultural situations is (e.g., fear).

10. Introduce EAS – Effective, Appropriate, Satisfactory – within the context of Ting-Toomey’s (1999) definition of Intercultural communication competence.

- Effective
  - Ask participants how they would define the term “effective.”
  - Explain: This is about your goal as a question-asker. Are you getting the information you are looking for?

- Appropriate
  - Ask participants how they would define the term “appropriate.”
    - What does “appropriate” mean to you?
    - What would feel like an appropriate question to get to know you?
    - What would feel like an inappropriate question to get to know you?
  - Explain that “appropriateness” means that the question follows cultural rules and norms on a societal level and does not violate anyone’s expectations of politeness.

- Satisfactory
  - Ask participants how they would define the term “satisfactory.”
  - Definition: “(T)o the extent that the important identities (e.g., cultural or gender) of the intercultural communicators have been positively addressed and sensitively dealt with, they will experience interaction satisfaction.” (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 265).
  - Explain that satisfactoriness comprises the impact a question has on an individual. It involves supporting and validating their identity and taking care of their needs in the questions we ask (e.g., avoiding making people feel like you’ve negatively stereotyped them, not putting pressure on people to talk about things that are deeply personal that they don’t want to share).
11. Engage participants in a discussion on the types of questions we should ask ourselves prior to asking a question of someone else that might help us ask E-A-S questions. Write down participants' answers on a dry erase/chalk board and take a picture of the board at the end of the activity, or record on a device via shared document to send to participants later (examples below).

- **Effective**
  - Will my question yield a result that satisfies my curiosity?
  - Will my question lead to an answer that teaches me something new?

- **Appropriate**
  - Is this a taboo question? Am I “allowed” to ask this question?
  - Will I make this person feel awkward based on gender, roles, etc.?
  - Is the time and place right for me to ask this question?

- **Satisfactory**
  - Is there a stereotype hidden in this question? Does my question reinforce a stereotype?
  - Have I considered how the other person will feel when I ask the question?
  - Will this question build trust between me and the other person?
  - Are there any implications of this question for the other person's belongingness or sense of acceptance? Does my question “Other” them (put them in the position of a “foreigner” or an “outsider”)?

*Digital option: You can also create a Jamboard and share the link with participants (if everyone has access to a mobile device/computer) so that everyone can contribute ideas to the board (See Example). You can instruct students to use the sticky note option in Jamboard to add their ideas.

Note: The Example link above is view only, so the facilitator will first need to make their own editable copy. In the top right corner, there is an icon with three vertical dots. Click that icon and ten select “Make a copy.” Rename the copied document to whatever is appropriate for the context. Click OK. You will then be directed to the new document. To ensure that anyone with the link to this new Jamboard copy has editing privileges, select “Share” in the top-right corner. Click “Change to anyone with the link.” A new window will pop up with a drop-down menu that says “Viewer.” Click that menu and select “Editor.” Delete the sticky note ideas currently on the document unless you would like to keep them for examples.

Other questions to consider:

- What is the question or comment that is really at the heart of what I’m asking? Is this a question or a comment? How would I answer this if someone asked me? Am I expecting a certain answer? Am I asking out of genuine interest or selfish curiosity? Why am I interested in knowing the answer? Do I have a right to know the answer? Where does this question come from for me?
- What informs this question for me? A video I saw/a depiction of a culture that wasn’t representative/was negative? An intersection of identities that doesn’t make sense to
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me? Does something about this person not line up with my understanding of the world? What if I'm wrong?

• What might I have to learn about this person that could expand my understanding of the world?
• Does this question allow this person to answer in a way that is true to who they are or am I boxing them in? Is this an open-ended question?
• Does my question tell someone who they are or invite them to share who they are?
• Do I already have an answer to this question in my mind? Does my question allow for an answer that reflects multiple cultural perspectives or only my own?
• How do I know what's important to the other person? Is the question I'm asking only important to me?
• Does my question come from a place of humility? Confusion? Indignance?
• What might I miss if I only ask questions that reflect and re-produce my own standpoint?
• What underlying assumptions are at the heart of my question?
• Does my question make a judgment or allow the person to describe themselves?
• Does my question reveal a judgment I have? Does my question suspend judgment?

Ensure participants have a physical copy of the Questions Across Cultures Handout. Next, give participants a video clip scenario to analyze that includes questions that are not effective, appropriate, or satisfactory. Instruct participants to analyze the question(s) through their new E-A-S lenses, using the Questions Across Cultures Handout to take notes. In each box (one for E, one for A, and one for S), ask participants to list what made or did not make the questions presented Effective, Appropriate, and Satisfactory. Ask participants to also note an alternative question(s) that could be asked instead of the questions presented in the video. Lastly, engage students in a group discussion on their individual notes from the handout.

Clip options:

• Deaf People Answer Commonly Googled Questions About Being Deaf*
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IgmB9c29UKU&t=50s
• Blind People Answer Commonly Googled Questions About Being Blind*
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ijin6J7AAw
• Indigenous People Answer Commonly Googled Questions About Native Americans*
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQWKlIF7oWM&t=145s
• Women Answer the Most Googled Questions About Women*
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FNw4vpTxjRI&t=111s
• What kind of Asian are you?
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DWynJkN5HbQ

*Note these videos do not include questions directly asked to the people interviewed (these are commonly Googled questions).
12. Ask participants to pair up. Instruct them to imagine they are on a team with someone culturally different from them and they would like to get to know them. Instruct them to keep in mind the importance of E-A-S (Effective, Appropriate, and Satisfactory) questions and identify three questions they would ask their teammate. You can allow them to browse the internet for ideas and inspiration as well if you would like.

*Tip: Encourage participants to think about information they might need to know about a team member so the team can work together more effectively (values, goals, communication/conflict styles, etc.).*

13. After partners have had time to identify three questions (approximately 5-10 minutes), engage the whole group in a discussion with each pair sharing the questions they came up with. Instruct participants to listen to the questions of their peers with critical ears and to appropriately challenge one another where necessary, as well as provide encouraging feedback where applicable.

14. Debrief the activity with participants:

- What did this activity bring up for you emotionally?
- Which part of the activity was most impactful for you?
- What is one thing you learned from this activity that you would like to incorporate into your interpersonal relationships? Does this activity change anything about the way you want to interact with people personally or professionally?
- If you ask a question in the future that you realize later (or in the moment) is not an E-A-S question, what actions will you take (either during the conversation or following up later to the conversation)? What could an appropriate acknowledgement of your mistake look like?
- If you are asked a question in the future that is not an E-A-S question, how do you want to respond?

**Related Tools:**

- [Conversation Starters: 200 questions to get to know someone](#)
- [Cultural Question Jar](#)
- [Digging Deeper Diversity Questions](#)
- [Five Nosy Questions](#)
- [Life Without Questions or No Questions, Please!, A](#)
- [Reducing Stereotype Threats](#)
- [Twenty-Five Questions](#)