



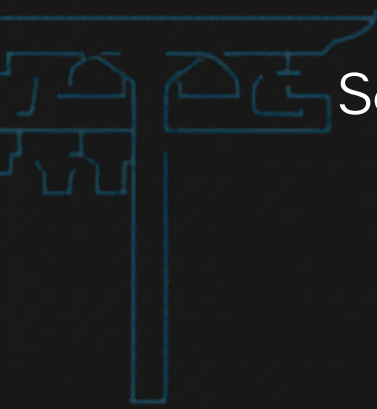
Culture, Power, and Practice



**A Guide to Intercultural Competence
in Community-Engaged Learning
Abroad**

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Culture, Power, and Practice: A Guide to Intercultural Competence in Community-Engaged Learning Abroad

Who Should Use This Guidebook and When to Use It¹

This guidebook is intended for program leaders who are designing their community-engaged learning (CEL) abroad programs to take more (cross-)cultural aspects into account in their planning. But first, what is CEL, and what makes a CEL abroad program different from a domestic one?

Community-Engaged Learning

Community-engaged learning (CEL) is an experiential learning approach that is being increasingly used in higher education to help students achieve better learning outcomes by collaborating with community partners and applying theoretical knowledge in real-world contexts. Structured and well-planned CEL programs are often mutually beneficial for students and community partners to help them achieve more and build closer relationships. CEL can also be a refresher for instructors who are seeking changes to their traditional courses by adopting a more hands-on perspective in teaching and learning. Interested in trying this approach? There are plenty of resources available to help you get started, such as this [wiki page](#) from the Bonner Foundation.

Community-Engaged Learning Abroad

CEL can be incorporated into regular courses through partnerships with local communities, as well as into study-abroad and service-abroad programs through collaboration with international partners. For study abroad and service abroad programs, CEL can serve the additional purpose of helping students become familiar with the local community and develop a sense of belonging in a new environment. This guidebook can be used to plan a wide range of study abroad programs (Engle & Engle, 2003), including short- and long-term programs, direct enrollment and third-party provider programs, as well as service-abroad programs in which students engage in organized community service in an international setting with preparation, reflection, and evaluation integrated into the experience (Fitts, 2009). If you are already planning a study abroad program, you might consider integrating a small or large CEL component into your program to support students' learning and adaptation in the host environment. If you are already teaching a CEL program, you might be inspired to include opportunities for cross-cultural collaboration with organizations abroad or for hosting international organizations and students. Again, it is worth exploring existing resources to support logistical planning, including [*A Student Resource Guide for Service Opportunities Abroad*](#) (Behrend, 2009) for more holistic guidance, and the [*Administrator's Resource Guide*](#), which provides details on some of the behind-the-scenes processes (Behrend, 2009).

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Scope and Focus of This Guidebook

Now you've decided to organize or join a community engaged learning (CEL) abroad program. Hooray! You have figured out the logistics and established the program details. Even better! So, what comes next? What additional cultural considerations are involved compared to a domestic CEL program? How can you communicate more appropriately across cultures? How can you accommodate communication differences when you and your community partners speak different primary languages? How are decisions typically made within your community partner organization? Is it possible to unintentionally offend others without realizing it? What should you do if you encounter conflict during your CEL abroad program? And how can participating in CEL abroad programs not only support local communities, but also make students' intercultural learning experiences more memorable and meaningful?

This guide is intended to help program leaders navigate these questions as they plan and participate in CEL abroad programs. The following sections explore topics such as language and communication accommodation, group dynamics and decision making, conflict management, and cultural adaptation and belonging. Through research-supported frameworks and practical suggestions, this guide helps elevate CEL abroad programs by applying key elements of intercultural awareness and competence to create more culturally adaptable and meaningful experiences.

So, Who Am I and What CEL Did I Do

I am Teri Terigele, a cross-cultural psychologist at Sewanee: The University of the South in the United States, who taught a CEL abroad course in Japan in collaboration with a host university. I was very fortunate to work with 20 international students representing more than five countries and collectively speaking more than 10 languages, as well as three local Japanese organizations.

This course, titled *Psychology of Multicultural Individuals in Japan*, investigates how individuals who are exposed to multiple cultures navigate their identities and cultural experiences, and how broader sociocultural environments affect their experiences and psychological wellbeing. This course explores topics and populations such as Edo-era interpreters in Nagasaki to contemporary contexts involving migrant workers, English teachers, and the Japanese diaspora (Nikkei). Designed to support the course's learning goals and its focus on diverse multicultural contexts, the CEL component in this course includes engaging with local elementary school students who are beginning their English studies, inviting an experienced English teacher as a guest speaker, and working with an organization that serves Brazilian Japanese and Japanese Brazilian (return) migrants in Japan.

These CEL projects provided meaningful opportunities for students and local community members to learn from one another and engage in conversations around topics relevant to both the students and the local community. The local elementary school students had a wonderful time practicing speaking and engaging in simple, authentic conversations with native English speakers and developed greater interest in learning English. Through the guest speaker session, my

students gained a broader understanding of English education in Japan, including the efforts, challenges, and perspectives of different stakeholders involved in English education. By connecting with a local migrant support center, students also enjoyed participating in community events and talking with staff and community members. These interactions allowed them to explore the historical background and lived experiences of migrants between Japan and Brazil, connecting historical developments with contemporary experiences. At the same time, I want to acknowledge an important limitation. Although we were able to support our community partners through events, participation, and conversations, we were not able to accomplish all of the deliverables I had initially hoped for, in part because of the challenges involved in coordinating activities within a limited timeframe. In many ways, however, our students were the ones who benefited most from these experiences. Our community partners embraced our collaboration so warmly, generously shared their time and knowledge, and took such good care of our students. I am deeply grateful for what they made possible for us, and I recognize that what we gained from these relationships far exceeded what we were able to give back in return.

How to Use This Guidebook

Each chapter starts with a discussion of a key topic in intercultural interaction by introducing relevant scholarly concepts and frameworks and examining how they may influence CEL abroad programs. **Scholarly concepts and frameworks are highlighted in red and bold** to emphasize evidence-based insights and recommendations. *Potential considerations and practical applications for CEL abroad programs are highlighted in purple and italicized* to help readers more easily identify and incorporate them into their own practice.

A **Toolkit** section, set apart from the main text by a horizontal line, provides practical strategies and reflection questions that CEL abroad program leaders can adapt to their own contexts.

At the end of each chapter, **A Glimpse from Practice** features a brief example from my experience developing and teaching a CEL abroad course in Japan, illustrating how the chapter's ideas may unfold in practice through a particular incident, experience, or challenge.

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Languages and Communication Style: Who Accommodates and How

As a reader of this guidebook, you presumably already have the privilege of using English either as your primary language or as a working language. When collaborating with community partners abroad, however, we may interact with people who speak different languages and/or have different communication styles. In addition to learning and adapting to the local language, accent, slang, communication style, and culture-specific content, it is also helpful to be aware of the power dynamics involved in linguistic accommodation and how they may shape impressions, relationships, and collaboration outcomes.

Language is Power

Being able to speak a language, or multiple languages, is powerful because language shapes our perceived reality and influences how we interact with other people and interpret our experiences. Different linguistic communities are also granted different levels of power, as some languages, such as English, are more widely spoken and socially dominant than others. Scholars often discuss the concept of **ethnolinguistic vitality** (Clément & Norton, 2021), which refers to a language's ability to sustain its presence and strength within society. For example, English and Mandarin speakers might take it for granted that they can easily access information in their own languages, whereas speakers of smaller language communities may find limited information available in their own language or may have to switch to a different language to access more information. Languages with lower ethnolinguistic vitality are increasingly at risk of extinction. According to the United Nations, on average, one language disappears every two weeks (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2016).

With the unequal power dynamics associated with ethnolinguistic vitality, some linguistic communities may be perceived and treated differently, or even stereotyped and prejudiced against, by people outside the group because of the language they speak. Being a native speaker of a dominant language can therefore be a privilege, as it often affects access to opportunities, credibility, and social influence within academic, professional, and intercultural interactions. Even within the less privileged linguistic groups, one's ability to speak a dominant language is often associated with greater power and can open the door to more opportunities and resources. For example, English is often a required subject in schools in many non-English-speaking countries and is included in college entrance exams and workplace performance evaluations. However, the ability to speak a second language is not always given the same weight in the US education system. In international assistance, for example, international aid to Africa is unevenly distributed and may be influenced by language bias, with French- and Portuguese-speaking countries receiving less attention than English-speaking ones, and their emergencies are often neglected (Inter Press Service, 2005). Most donors also produce guidelines in their own languages, often from the Global North, and expect responses to proposal calls in these languages rather than in local languages, which makes it “basically impossible to work in the aid sector if we don't master at least one of these languages.” (Vitantonio, 2022, para. 10).

In addition to language, communication styles and personality traits are also important factors that affect interactions and collaboration in CEL abroad programs. Direct and indirect communication, also conceptualized as **low-context and high-context communication**, is one of the most commonly known differences in communication styles. Some cultures tend to be more explicit and direct when setting goals, clarifying expectations, and giving feedback, while others place greater emphasis on maintaining harmony and preserving relationships and therefore use more indirect communication styles. Personality traits may also be interpreted differently across cultures. For example, assertiveness is often perceived differently in Eastern and Western cultures (Lee & Ciftci, 2014). Being assertive is commonly associated with confidence and credibility and is therefore viewed more positively in many Western cultures, whereas it may be perceived as aggressive or self-absorbed in Eastern cultures that place a higher value on modesty and social harmony.

In CEL abroad programs, communication often defaults to a dominant language, frequently English, and communication style often defaults to the more socially and culturally privileged group. However, this choice is not neutral. It reflects broader global power structures and shapes who are expected to adapt and make extra efforts in interaction.

From the very beginning, when selecting and deciding which organizations to work with, CEL abroad program leaders from WEIRD countries (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic societies; Henrich et al., 2010) may naturally incline toward organizations that already provide documents and websites in a dominant language such as English. Within local organizations in non-English-speaking countries, individuals who are fluent in English may be more likely to serve as the primary contacts and facilitate the CEL abroad programs. As a result, they may have greater influence over communication, decision-making, and agenda setting. These selection biases may end up screening out perspectives from local community members whom the local organizations and CEL abroad programs actually intend to serve.

During the collaboration process, CEL program leaders and student participants are likely to communicate only with English-speaking members of the community or to favor those who communicate in ways that are more similar to their own linguistic and interpersonal styles. For example, this may include individuals who speak with greater confidence, are more assertive, or engage more readily in small talk. To avoid creating a CEL environment that is pre-filtered by linguistic and communication styles, it is important to acknowledge linguistic privilege, make efforts to learn the local language, and appreciate the efforts of community partners and local participants who make accommodations in many ways.

Communication Accommodation

When we do not share a common primary language with our community partners, which language do we use to communicate? When we have different communication styles with our community partners, how does it affect the interpretation, evaluation, and mutual satisfaction?

Communication accommodation theory (CAT) was developed to better understand how

individuals adjust their communicative behaviors, such as switching languages, simplifying speech, or changing tone, to assimilate to their interlocutors and achieve communicative goals (Terigele & Zhang, 2025). Research on CAT shows that in interactions between different social groups, such as across gender, age, or hierarchical roles, **accommodation is often asymmetrical**. Those in more disadvantaged or marginalized positions are typically expected to accommodate to those with greater social power, while it is seldom the other way around.

In CEL abroad contexts, linguistic privilege can appear in subtle but important ways. For example, community partners in non-English-speaking contexts may:

- translate their materials into English for visiting participants
- adjust communication styles to align with CEL program expectations
- simplify complex local issues to ensure understanding
- take additional time to ensure clarity in discussion

These practices are often invisible, yet they require cognitive effort, emotional labor, and lots of additional time and commitment from the local organizations. When they go well, they are often taken for granted and go unnoticed; when they are absent or break down, they are more likely to be immediately noticed and perceived as problems or missteps. At the same time, participants who are fluent in the dominant language may be perceived as more confident, knowledgeable, or capable of leadership, even when language proficiency is not directly related to expertise.

Toolkit: Effective and Accommodative Communication in CEL Abroad Programs

This toolkit provides practical strategies and reflection questions for CEL abroad program leaders to support intercultural awareness and more effective and appropriate communication in CEL abroad programs.

Practical Strategies

One practical step is to consider **language accessibility** from the very beginning of communication. For instance, when sending an initial contact email, it can be helpful to include a translated version in the local language when possible (this is where well trained AI tools can be useful but their output should be carefully reviewed). It is also important to clearly state that the translation may not be fully accurate, but is intended to increase accessibility and support mutual understanding.

Learning elements of the local language is another meaningful way to support more balanced communication. Completely mastering another language may not be feasible within a limited timeframe, especially for students who may not have prior location-specific expertise before signing up for the program. However, even basic efforts, such as learning greetings, key phrases, or terminology related to the community partner's goals and daily operations, can signal respect and willingness to engage beyond one's own linguistic comfort zone. CEL abroad program leaders can provide relevant resources for students as early as they join the program to help prepare them for the communication accommodation required when working with local organizations and community members. Communication accommodation research also suggests

that motives and willingness to accommodate may be as important as linguistic competence (Gasiorek & Giles, 2012). In other words, effective intercultural communication is not only about proficiency, but also about effort, awareness, and responsiveness to others' communicative needs.

Finally, even small adjustments in interactional practices can make a meaningful difference.

Providing materials in writing before and after meetings, pausing more intentionally to allow time for processing, and creating and sharing a glossary of commonly used terms specific to the CEL site can all help create more balanced communication spaces where more voices are included and heard. Additionally, showing appreciation and acknowledging community partners' efforts can make their accommodation more visible and valued. For example, every time I hear my Japanese community partners apologize for their "limited English skills" (even though they communicate very well in English), I tell them that they are speaking English only because I cannot communicate as effectively in Japanese. They are the ones doing me a favor.

Reflection Questions

In CEL abroad programs, developing intercultural competence involves intentional reflection on everyday communication practices. These questions can help CEL abroad program leaders reflect on their own perspectives when designing the programs and discuss with students during the onboarding and site visit sessions to examine how language shapes participation, interaction, and understanding in real time.

- What specific adjustments might be needed due to the differences in language and communication style? Who is more likely to be doing most of the linguistic adjustment in this interaction?
- Whose voice is most easily expressed in this communication space? Whose perspectives might be left out?
- How do we evaluate expertise and knowledge when they are expressed in different languages?
- What assumptions are being made about language ability and expertise?
- How can we create more room to include more voices?
- What forms of non-verbal or alternative communication can be used?

A Glimpse from Practice

One of the community partners I worked with in Japan was an organization that supports Brazilian Japanese and Japanese Brazilian migrants living in Japan. The CEL project involved visiting their museum, which was hosted by Japanese staff, and meeting with migrants who were taking Japanese language courses at their center. The language program was primarily run by Japanese staff and supported by students who spoke Portuguese. In my initial communication with the organization, I wrote emails in English and provided Japanese translations. My community partner was very accommodating and kindly offered to use English for subsequent communication, while modestly noting that their English proficiency might not be sufficient. At

that point, everything seemed to be going smoothly. However, when we began coordinating a visit to their Japanese language classes, I received an email that I misunderstood. I interpreted their message as saying that the language center operated in Portuguese and that future communication with them should be conducted in Portuguese.

Because I was very conscious of avoiding an English-centered approach, I immediately felt concerned that I had overlooked the importance of including Portuguese in my initial communication. So I replied with an apology, including a Portuguese translation of my follow-up message. My community partner later clarified that they were not expecting me to communicate in Portuguese. Rather, they were explaining the context of the language program and informing me that the available visiting times depended on the schedule of the only English-speaking staff member on their team. The misunderstanding was quickly resolved and, interestingly, became a conversation starter when I later met the English-speaking staff member.

Throughout this process, my community partner demonstrated tremendous patience and flexibility, both in the initial coordination with me and later in collaborating with our students. This experience reminded me that even with the best intentions to be culturally responsive and avoid centering my own linguistic background, misunderstandings can still occur. What helped resolve the situation was not avoiding mistakes altogether, but having a trusting relationship where both sides were willing to clarify, communicate, and approach the misunderstanding with understanding and openness.

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Group Dynamics: Participation and Decision Making

Organizing and participating in CEL abroad programs involve working within a group and between groups. You will be communicating with people from your own organization, with community partners, with the broader communities they serve, and, especially in international contexts, with other stakeholders who support and facilitate cross-cultural coordination. In this process, you may find that group dynamics differ across cultures in terms of how participation is expected and expressed, as well as how decision-making processes are structured. Being attentive to these variations in group norms in CEL abroad programs helps prevent misinterpretations of intent or credibility and supports more equitable engagement by ensuring that diverse communication styles and decision-making practices are respected rather than judged through a single cultural lens.

Group Dynamics and Power Hierarchy

Group dynamics is defined as “a collection of individuals interacting for a common purpose and whose interactions are the very stuff of social existence, performance, satisfaction, well-being, self-definition, and education, among other social and psychological needs” (Tasca, 2020). Group processes are not experienced or organized in the same way across cultures. Cultural beliefs and values influence how people participate in groups, how decisions are made, how leadership is understood, and how conflict is managed.

A key concept in understanding interactions and group dynamics within a group is **power distance (or hierarchy)**, which refers to how less powerful members of a society accept and expect an unequal distribution of power (Hofstede, 1984; The Culture Factor Group, n.d.). In high power distance cultures, hierarchy is more accepted and expected. Leaders are often seen as decision-makers who provide direction. In low power distance cultures, leadership tends to be more participatory, with an emphasis on consultation and shared influence. A directive leadership style may be viewed as effective and appropriate in one cultural context, but as overly controlling in another. Similarly, participatory leadership may be seen as inclusive in some contexts, but as lacking structure and efficiency in others. As someone who is trained in one of the WEIRD cultures (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic; Henrich et al., 2010) with low power distance, it is natural for me to connect power hierarchy with domination and inequality, which carries a negative connotation and invites criticism. However, in other cultural contexts, hierarchy is often associated with clear structure and protocol, as well as greater work efficiency. Therefore, participation norms and decision-making processes in CEL abroad programs may be evaluated drastically differently when working with groups from different cultural contexts.

When working with organizations from high-power-distance cultures, CEL program leaders and student participants should be mindful of organizational hierarchies and carefully consider whom to contact, what topics to discuss, and in what context. For example, a program leader may maintain close communication with a staff member who serves as the primary contact because

they are fluent in English, even though that individual occupies a relatively junior position within the organization. In such cases, soliciting extensive or sensitive information about the organization or community, or directing additional requests, proposals, or decisions through this person, may place them on the spot, disrupt internal communication channels, and potentially jeopardize the individual's standing within the organization. Understanding local power structures and communication protocols and decision making processes can help make the interactions more respectful, effective, and supportive of community partners and their members.

Interaction and Decision Making Processes

In some cultural contexts, open discussion, active verbal participation, and spontaneous sharing of ideas during a meeting are encouraged, and decisions are often made through collective deliberation. Speaking up is encouraged and associated with engagement, confidence, and contribution. In other cultural contexts, however, group participation may be more structured and restrained, and decision making may be more hierarchical or guided by designated roles. Listening, reflection, and speaking at appropriate moments may be more valued than frequent verbal contributions. Silence may indicate respect or careful consideration rather than lack of engagement. These differences can lead to contrasting interpretations of the same behavior. For example, some participants may interpret a lack of open debate as lack of engagement, while others may perceive prolonged discussion as inefficient or unnecessary.

These participation and discussion norms also intersect with various identities and associated power hierarchies, such as supervisor and subordinate roles, gender, age, and linguistic background. For example, in some contexts, male participants may dominate open discussion, while female participants contribute more in private or structured settings. Age and seniority may also shape speaking order and whose views carry more weight, with younger participants or junior staff often waiting for cues before contributing. In multilingual settings, those more fluent in the dominant language may be seen as more competent or authoritative, or may be expected to contribute more in open discussions.

In addition to power hierarchies, norms in group discussion settings are also influenced by how formal or informal the work environment is, and by how certain communication styles, such as assertiveness and accommodation, are valued. Work environments such as meetings can be very formal in some organizations and cultural contexts, where you may experience complete silence before a meeting begins. Also, in some faith-based organizations, it can be common for meetings or site visits to begin with a short prayer or devotional, and in such situations it is generally appropriate for participants to remain quietly attentive and observe respectfully. In contrast, other organizations or cultural contexts may encourage small talk before meeting starts and view it as a sign of relational building and professional competence. Similarly, assertive communication may be viewed as confident and competent in some cultures, but may be seen as arrogant and lacking flexibility or accommodation in others.

Understanding these differences helps *teams, especially intercultural teams in CEL abroad programs*, avoid misinterpretation and make more intentional choices about how participation is

expected during meetings and how decisions are made. Making discussion structures and decision-making processes explicit at the beginning of collaboration can help ensure that all members understand how input will be gathered and how final decisions will be reached.

Toolkit: Enhancing Group Dynamics in CEL Abroad Programs

This toolkit provides practical strategies and reflection questions to help program leaders navigate group dynamics, power differences, and communication styles in CEL abroad programs and better prepare their students for the abroad program.

Practical Strategies

Before implementing the actual community engagement, it is helpful to **learn about your community partners and establish collaboration norms early**. Start by understanding your community partner's organizational culture, including their group dynamics, roles of different members, and decision-making processes. Consider asking:

- How is community engagement described and perceived in the host culture, recognizing that it may not be referred to as community engagement per se?
- Are there specific units, offices, or designated staff members responsible for community engagement or equivalent activities?
- How are decisions made within their organization, and who should be contacted to confirm final decisions?
- How long does the decision-making process usually take?
- Do they prefer a more formal and professional communication style, or a more casual format?
- At the beginning of collaboration, explicitly discuss:
 - What is the preferred frequency of discussions and check-in points?
 - How should discussions be structured (e.g., open discussion, turn-taking, or written input)?

In intercultural settings, unstructured free discussion often privileges more assertive speakers and overlooks less vocal participants. At the same time, more verbal participation does not necessarily lead to better discussion. It may be helpful to consider structured participation methods, such as **anonymous sharing and feedback** or **written brainstorming before verbal discussion**, as well as culturally appropriate forms of interpersonal engagement, such as **consulting appropriate supervisors, senior members, or designated representatives** when decisions involve organizational authority and **building rapport or engaging in informal conversation** before addressing sensitive topics or difficult discussions.

In addition to best practices, an important mindset is to understand that learning about community partners and their organizational and broader sociocultural contexts is an ongoing process of learning and unlearning. CEL program leaders, especially when working with an organization for the first time, may benefit from doing preliminary research on general cultural

tendencies such as direct or indirect communication styles and power distance. At the same time, these frameworks should be held lightly and continually re-examined in practice to avoid stereotyping and to maintain a flexible, responsive approach. Each community partner is different, and individuals within the same organization may also vary. Understanding cultural tendencies and organizational structures can help with anticipation and planning for smoother collaboration; however, remaining open to revision in real-time allows interactions to better fit the specific context. In this sense, being proactive and being responsive are equally important in calibrating communication and collaboration styles with community partners.

7

Reflection Questions

Intentional observation and reflection on group dynamics within your organization, within your community partner's organization, and in the intercultural communication between both sides can help us become more aware of cultural differences that shape group dynamics, as well as identify best practices for fostering mutually satisfying collaboration. Consider asking yourself or discussing with others the following questions:

1. What is the current decision-making process in this CEL abroad program?
2. Am I reaching out to the community partner in an appropriate way, including contacting the right person at the right time with effective and accessible language?
3. What are the communication styles and work styles that I am used to from my previous experience? What are the underlying assumptions or precedents behind these practices?
4. What assumptions have I made about the community partners' communication and work styles? Any differences compared to the environment I am used to?
5. If there is a work style from my community partners' side that I find unsatisfactory, what might be the reasons they are working in this way? Are there any changes I can initiate on my end?
6. In face-to-face discussions, who speaks most frequently? Who has not yet spoken?
7. Whose perspectives might be missing if we continue with this communication format? Are there additional or alternative formats that could help bring in more voices?

A Glimpse from Practice

Taking my own experience as an example, my CEL program was embedded within a faculty-led study abroad program in partnership with a local Japanese university. One of the CEL projects involved connecting with a local elementary school. Throughout this process, I was fortunate to have strong support from the host university, including a staff member who served as my primary contact person. This staff member drew upon her own professional network and connected me with a local organization that organizes various community-engaged events. Through this organization, we were able to establish a connection with the elementary school. As a result, the coordination process involved conversations among four different organizations, as well as multiple units within each organization, such as the Registrar's Office and the study abroad center. One of the first questions I encountered was whether I should directly communicate with local organizations or wait for my host university contact to initiate and

facilitate communication. On one hand, I wanted to be proactive and build relationships with community partners. On the other hand, I recognized that this CEL project represented the host university to some extent and could influence its existing relationships with local communities. I wanted to ensure that my actions did not unintentionally create administrative or culturally inappropriate situations.

To navigate this complexity, I had multiple conversations with my host university contact to share my thought process and clarify expectations. We discussed when and how communication should occur, who should take the lead in contacting different partners, and her previous experiences working with the collaborating organizations. These conversations helped me better understand the importance of respecting existing partnership structures and institutional relationships while also finding appropriate ways to contribute to the collaboration.

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Conflict: How to Avoid It and How to Manage It When It Happens

We don't like tension. However, conflict is an inevitable part of interpersonal communication and collaboration, especially in CEL abroad programs that involve people from different cultural backgrounds and norms. Therefore, it becomes important to understand how we perceive and manage conflict when it happens, and to consider the perspectives of the other parties involved and understand where they are coming from.

What is Conflict

Conflict is often defined as a **perceived or actual incompatibility** between individuals or groups (Putnam, 2006). This means that even when incompatibility is perceived by only one side, it can still lead to conflict and potentially interfere with collaboration and mutual perceptions, sometimes without the other party even being aware of it. *In CEL programs abroad*, conflict may arise from anxiety while waiting for responses across time differences, frustration from miscommunication, unease with silence in conversation, or assumptions about a lack of engagement. Being mindful of the potential causes and taking early steps to clarify misunderstandings can help prevent conflict and support more effective conflict management when it does occur.

Common Causes of Conflict in Intercultural Contexts

Conflicts are more likely to occur in intercultural contexts than in intracultural ones due to differences in communication styles, priorities and expectations around involvement and work ethics, and higher levels of uncertainty associated with navigating a new environment.

Communication Styles and Facework

In the previous section on language and communication accommodation, we discussed the difference between high-context and low-context communication styles. In high-context cultures, people often rely on implicit messages and contextual cues to convey meaning without directly addressing an issue, whereas in low-context cultures, people tend to communicate more explicitly and rely less on contextual interpretation. Entering a communication situation without awareness of these differences can lead to misunderstandings of others' behaviors and intentions, which may in turn result in dissatisfaction, frustration, or conflict. In low-context cultures, direct communication is often perceived as professional and effective, while in high-context settings it may be seen as arrogant or lacking sensitivity. On the other hand, indirect communication is often valued in high-context cultures and is seen as respectful and considerate. However, from the perspective of low-context cultures, this style may be interpreted as "beating around the bush" or even as being sneaky.

Underlying the difference between direct and indirect communication are often cultural beliefs and norms regarding **face and facework**. Face refers to how people maintain their own and others' social standing and public image and facework refers to the verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors that are used to protect or save self, other, or mutual face (Ting-Toomey, 2015). Most people value maintaining a positive social image and, in many

situations, recognize the same need in others and communicate in ways that preserve mutual respect. However, facework can be expressed and interpreted differently across cultures. For example, in some high-context cultures, directly pointing out a problem or mistake may be perceived as a strong accusation or public embarrassment and make the resulting damage to the relationship more difficult to repair. If the culture also has a high power distance and places strong value on hierarchy, expressing criticism or dissatisfaction may be considered appropriate primarily for those in positions of authority rather than for individuals who are more junior. In addition, in cultures with strong boundaries between ingroup and outgroup, direct discussion of problems may be more common in close relationships or long-term work relationships within an organization and may not be expected or expressed in interactions with outsider CEL collaborators, who often have temporary or limited relationships with the community partner.

When communicating with your community partner or other stakeholders, if you receive responses that seem “overly” direct or indirect, it is helpful to give them the benefit of the doubt, as this may reflect their cultural norms and priorities regarding effectiveness, relationship maintenance, and appropriate communication styles rather than any negative intent. At the same time, it’s also helpful to reflect on your own communication style and consider whether it aligns with that of your partners and the local community abroad.

Expectations of Work Ethic and Involvement

Cultures also differ in how they assess whether individuals or groups are contributing sufficiently to a collaboration or working hard enough. This is often conceptualized in terms of **motivation for achievement and success** (formerly referred to as masculinity and femininity; The Culture Factor Group, n.d.). Expectations around workload, punctuality, and power dynamics may be structured and interpreted in very different ways. Some cultures take a more achievement-oriented approach and emphasize productivity, performance, and success, while others place greater value on work-life balance and fostering a supportive, nurturing environment for everyone involved. In highly achievement-oriented cultures, hard work and even working after regular hours are often encouraged and normalized because they are seen as signs of dedication to organizational goals and commitment to professional relationships. In contrast, other cultures may view excessive working hours as part of an unhealthy “rat race” that is unsustainable in the long term. They may also perceive it as overly individualistic, as it prioritizes personal success over the well-being of the broader community and can reduce the time available for family, social responsibilities, and collective welfare.

During CEL abroad programs, instead of jumping to the conclusion that one side is being overly demanding or that the other is being too lazy or disengaged, we can learn about and compare our own cultural expectations with those of the host context and develop a more compatible approach. In the early stages, clearly communicating and aligning expectations around each party’s roles, workload and schedules, leadership and responsibilities, as well as preferred points of contact and communication methods, can help ensure smoother and more satisfying collaboration for everyone involved.

Another foundational cause of conflict is the difference in priorities. Collaboration and learning are the top priorities for program leaders and students, in addition to supporting community partners in achieving their goals. However, it is important to keep in mind that, by initiating a CEL program, we are joining community partners who have their own established organizational and community goals, daily operations, and broader issues they are managing. As a result, the CEL collaboration and our students may not be their top priority. Program leaders can communicate this clearly to students so that they do not feel frustrated if they do not receive immediate responses or attention from community partners.

Language Barriers and Emotional Stress While Abroad

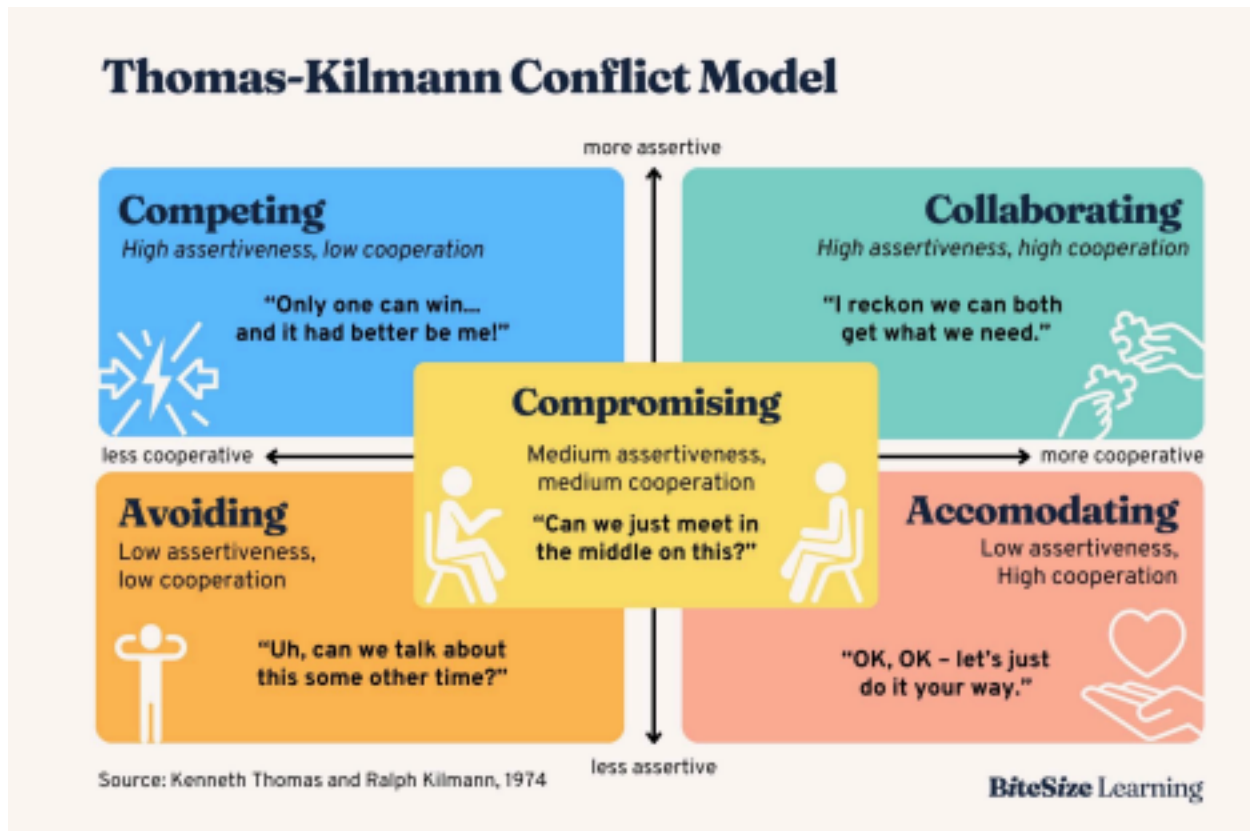
We often anticipate language barriers and emotional stress before departing for a trip abroad, but may lose sight of how these challenges actually affect our functioning and collaboration with others once we are fully immersed in a different cultural context. When we communicate in a language that is not our primary language, or with others who are using a non-primary language (to accommodate to us), miscommunication, delays in understanding, and feelings of uncertainty and being overwhelmed can easily happen. For example, when a program leader has been blocked by a visa application system for the fifteenth time while trying to gain access, the last thing they want is another email from a community partner requesting additional paperwork or changes to the project plan. Similarly, when a community member turns to colleagues, communicates in a language that a program leader does not understand, and then begins laughing, the program leader may feel anxious or uncertain, wondering whether the laughter is directed at them or whether important information is being withheld from them. Even when we are cognitively aware of these barriers, we may still feel frustrated or impatient when it requires extra brain power to process and navigate these challenges. It is particularly challenging for us to make the best judgments or present our best selves when experiencing acculturation stress that goes beyond what we encounter on a daily basis.

When leading or participating in CEL programs abroad, we can keep reminding ourselves to give both ourselves and our partners more grace and patience, and to acknowledge that intercultural collaboration is challenging in itself. We are all doing our best to make this challenging but meaningful experience happen.

Conflict Management Styles

Conflict is an inherent part of human communication. In addition to trying to prevent it before it happens, it is equally important to understand how we manage conflict and how conflict management styles may differ across cultures. One of the most commonly used frameworks in scholarly work on conflict management is the **Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument** (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). Depending on how cooperative and how assertive one is when responding to a conflict scenario, conflict management styles can usually be divided into five types: collaborating, accommodating, compromising, competing, and avoiding. The collaborating style focuses on finding a solution that fully addresses the needs and interests of all parties involved. Accommodating style involves prioritizing the needs or preferences of the other party over one's own. Compromising style seeks a middle ground where each party gives up

something to reach an acceptable agreement. It emphasizes fairness and practicality rather than finding the ideal solution. Competing style involves pursuing one's own position strongly, often through assertiveness, persuasion, or authority. It reflects a "my way or no way" mindset. The avoiding style involves withdrawing from or postponing the conflict rather than addressing it directly, which happens when handling insignificant issues. Below is a visual illustration provided by [BiteSize Learning](#).



Which conflict management style to use in a given situation reflects both one's personality and the immediate context. Some individuals are naturally inclined toward certain styles more than others. At the same time, people may adjust their approach depending on the situation; for example, one may adopt a more competing style when outcomes matter more, and an accommodating style when the relationship is valued more than the issue at hand. Conflict management styles can also vary across cultures. For example, research suggests that Western contexts tend to favor more direct confrontation, while Eastern contexts often emphasize harmony and avoidance-oriented approaches influenced by Confucian values that stress harmony and hierarchy (Kim & Leung, 2000; Zhang et al., 2005).

In CEL abroad programs, when conflict arises within or between organizations, it is worth considering what outcomes each party is prioritizing and what approaches are most likely to support long-term relationships. Decisions made in these moments can have lasting effects, as

what happens abroad does not simply stay abroad but often shapes ongoing partnerships and future collaboration. It is important to approach conflict in a way that preserves trust and mutual respect, rather than burning bridges.

Toolkit: Avoiding and Managing Conflicts

This toolkit provides reflection questions and practical strategies to help you prevent conflict within and between organizations, and to manage it effectively when it occurs in order to maintain positive and long-lasting collaborative relationships.

Practical Strategies

It is always helpful to **empathize with the other party's perspective** and understand why they may be managing conflict in a particular way, whether shaped by organizational goals, cultural differences, or other contextual factors. This [country comparison tool](#) provided by the Culture Factor Group can help us learn about cultural differences across six dimensions and potentially provide insights into why we may perceive incompatibilities with others from different cultural contexts. From there, we can ask whether and how the dynamics might be shifted to support more constructive interaction moving forward.

It is worth noting that conflict is not always a negative sign. **Open and honest communication about incompatibilities can be a constructive way** to address potential or ongoing issues and pave the way for smoother collaboration in the future. Avoiding conflict is not the same as avoiding resolving it. Addressing and processing conflict is often necessary in healthy collaboration.

Some other strategies that can be implemented in conflict management include **pausing before reacting** and revisiting the conflict later, **seeking clarification or giving the benefit of doubt** rather than assuming intent, using **simple, neutral, and accessible language when addressing concerns**, focusing on **shared goals** rather than incidental incompatibility, and, when appropriate, involving **a neutral mediator who is well trusted in the local community**.

Reflection Questions

Clear expectations, taking perspectives, and frequent check-ins can help prevent conflicts when working with community partners from different cultural contexts. Mindful conflict management with clear priorities can help us decide on specific strategies to use and better understand the strategies used by the other party. Reflecting on these questions or discussing them directly with community partners can help clarify misunderstandings and support smoother interactions moving forward.

- How do I typically respond when conflict or misunderstanding happens, and what are the pros and cons of this approach?
- What assumptions might I be bringing into the situation about the “right” way to handle conflict?

- What is my task goal and relationship goal in this CEL abroad program, and which one do I prioritize if they are not fully compatible?
 - What part of our CEL program may cause conflict? Is it inevitable, and can I discuss it with community partners beforehand to prevent misunderstandings? If not, how can I best serve the interests of both parties?
 - How comfortable am I with directly addressing conflict across cultural or linguistic differences?
 - What strategies have helped me move from misunderstanding toward mutual understanding?
-

A Glimpse from Practice

One incompatibility I experienced while coordinating a CEL project occurred with my host university. Initially, I worked with the CEL contact person at the host university to organize a visit to a local elementary school during one of my class periods. However, two weeks before the scheduled visit, my contact person suddenly informed me that the visit had not been approved by the Registrar's Office. According to their policy, field trips or off-campus activities were not permitted during designated class time.

This situation created an awkward dynamic because the incompatibility was not simply between me and the host institution, but between different units within the same institution. I sensed that the staff members involved were colleagues who had established long-term working relationships, which made conflict management more sensitive and complex. Both sides needed to address the immediate issue while also maintaining their internal professional relationships.

At the same time, as a newcomer and outsider to the organization, I found myself in a unique position. My outsider status gave me the opportunity to take initiative in communicating across different units and raise questions or concerns that might be more difficult for colleagues within the institution to bring forward. I arranged a meeting with the Registrar's Office to clarify the purpose of the visit and explain why the scheduled class time was the most appropriate option for both my students and the partner elementary school. Fortunately, the Registrar's Office was willing to make an exception to the policy, considering that the visit had already been arranged with the community partner and that maintaining positive relationships with local communities was important for the university. They also explained that an exception could be considered because I was a visiting professor rather than a permanent faculty member. Ultimately, the three parties involved—each with different priorities, responsibilities, and perspectives—were able to reach a positive outcome through a collaborative approach.

This experience also enhanced my understanding of cultural norms in the host society. Japanese society is often stereotyped as being highly structured, rule-oriented, and attentive to avoiding inconvenience for others. However, my collaborators also demonstrated a strong commitment to maintaining relationships with the local community and showed flexibility in supporting an international partner. Moving beyond stereotypes, this experience allowed me to observe how people actually navigate complex conflict situations by balancing institutional policies, interpersonal relationships, and the needs of multiple stakeholders.

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CEL Abroad Programs and Students' Sense of Belonging to the Host Culture

The backdrop of CEL abroad programs is a new cultural environment in which students are working, living, and slowly adapting to. Study abroad or service abroad experiences provide not only cultural immersion and learning but also uncertainty and challenges to mental wellbeing. After the initial honeymoon stage when everything feels novel and exciting, students often experience a gradual shift with increased loneliness, isolation, and psychological stress. Meaningful engagement with the local community can help reduce feelings of isolation and adaptation stress, and help students develop a sense of belonging to the host culture.

Sense of Belonging

Maslow's hierarchy of needs stated that humans do have a need to make connections with people around us and belong to a group. **Sense of belonging** is defined as "a subjective feeling of value and respect derived from a reciprocal relationship to an external referent that is built on a foundation of shared experiences, beliefs or personal characteristics" (Mahar et al., 2013). When students study or serve abroad, they may temporarily lose the sense of belonging they are used to having at home and need to establish new routines and support systems in the host environment. This process includes developing new relationships through which they can both receive and give tangible and emotional support. However, linguistic and cultural barriers may limit students' ability to form close connections immediately. Therefore, the support provided by both host and home institutions becomes an important initial foundation that helps students succeed in the new environment.

Cross-cultural adaptation and acculturation literature suggests that establishing contact and building connections with local host nationals is crucial for successful adaptation to a new cultural environment. **Intergroup contact** research similarly shows that positive and frequent interaction with local host nationals can foster intercultural friendships and improve intergroup attitudes. While numerous studies highlight the importance of building relationships with local host nationals for increasing international students' well-being, they offer few concrete suggestions for doing so. Even with the well known benefits of interacting with and building relationships with host nationals, people still tend to engage primarily with their own ingroup rather than establish contact with those from cultural outgroups (Paolini et al., 2018). For students studying abroad, they may be more inclined to stay within their cultural enclave to ease the anxiety of stepping outside their comfort zone or retreat to their cultural enclave after encountering challenges and frustrations when interacting with host nationals, even when they initially intend to engage with the local community.

Simple greetings and casual small talk may provide an initial opportunity for connection, but repeated interactions, shared experiences, and opportunities to develop closer relationships may be more important for building meaningful cross-group relationships (MacInnis & Page-Gould, 2022). Participating in a CEL abroad program offers a natural setting for students to engage with local communities and host nationals and produce tangible deliverables, which can greatly

enhance their sense of belonging and purpose during their time abroad. Unlike short-term tourism-based experiences, CEL abroad programs create structured and meaningful opportunities for repeated contact, collaboration, and reflection. These experiences move students beyond passive observation into active participation in local contexts. By working on CEL projects, students can also learn and gain firsthand experience with the local community and cultural norms, including language and communication styles, workplace norms and expectations, and conflict management styles. When students are able to support the local community and contribute to meaningful outcomes, the sense of fulfillment can also enhance their satisfaction with their abroad experience. Together, these deeper interactions and collaborative experiences create important conditions for successful adaptation and a stronger sense of belonging to the host community.

Toolkit: Enhancing Sense of Belonging to the Host Culture Through CEL

This toolkit provides reflection questions and assessment tools to help CEL abroad program leaders evaluate the impact of their programs on students' adaptation and sense of belonging to the host culture.

Practical Strategies and Assessment Tools

Here are some general guidelines for intentionally designing CEL abroad programs that enhance participants' sense of belonging to the host culture.

1. creating frequent or sustained, rather than one-off, interactions with community partners
2. facilitating collaborative projects built around shared goals and deeper collaboration
3. supporting reciprocal engagement in which both students and community partners contribute and learn from one another
4. seeking opportunities for mentorship, peer support, or host community support systems to help students' adaptation
5. providing opportunities for structured reflection on cultural adaptation and sense of belonging

Below are two scales that measure sense of belonging. CEL abroad program leaders can easily adapt items from these scales to assess whether participating in community engagement abroad helped students build connections with the local community and whether such experiences enhanced their sense of belonging to the host culture.

International Students' Sense of Belonging to the Host Institution (Caligiuri et al., 2020)

1. I see myself as part of the campus community.
2. I feel as though I belong here at [UNIVERSITY or COUNTRY].
3. I feel comfortable living here at [UNIVERSITY or COUNTRY].

General Belongingness Scale (Malone, 2012)

Acceptance/Inclusion

1. When I am with other people, I feel included.

2. I have close bonds with family and friends (can be adapted to friends in the host culture).
3. I feel accepted by others.
4. I have a sense of belonging.
5. I have a place at the table with others.
6. I feel connected with others.

Reflection Questions

Participating in CEL abroad programs can naturally help students enhance their sense of belonging, but intentionally recognizing and reflecting on this process can further strengthen its impact. Reflection helps students not only better understand the host community, but also become more aware of their own identities and social groups.

1. What specific activities or interactions during this CEL abroad program helped you feel more welcomed, included, or accepted?
2. Have you received (or given) social support or developed relationships with local community members that helped you adapt to the host environment?
3. What cultural or linguistic barriers affected your ability to connect with them?
4. What did you learn about local cultural norms, communication styles, or workplace expectations through this program?
5. Have these experiences changed how you understand your own cultural identity or your positionality within global society?
6. What additional opportunities or interactions would help strengthen your sense of belonging to the host community?

A Glimpse from Practice

At the end of the semester, students created video essays reflecting on their whole semester abroad, including both external experiences and their internal processes of cultural adaptation and belonging. While many highlighted memorable cultural immersion experiences, such as traveling, wearing traditional kimono, and participating in tea ceremonies, they also returned to the familiar people, places, and relationships they encountered through our CEL projects.

Students recalled the migration story of a Japanese-Brazilian family whose third-generation member returned to Japan and navigated what it meant to reconnect with their ancestral homeland, the vivid facial expressions of the elementary school students they worked with and the confidence they gained through those interactions, as well as other small but meaningful moments from their community engagement. One student said that, even though Japan's public transportation system can be quite complicated, they were proud that they no longer needed Google Maps to navigate the neighborhood or find their way to our community partner's site, as these routes had become so familiar to them.

Students also mapped their psychological trajectories throughout the semester, capturing moments of excitement and struggle as well as the growing comfort that came with greater familiarity and meaningful engagement. Of course, not all of these experiences can be attributed

to the CEL component alone. However, these deep and meaningful community engagements became an important part of students' journeys and contributed to what made their semester abroad memorable and unique. Many students expressed how much they had enjoyed their time in Japan and how difficult it was to leave, while others chose to extend their engagement with the host culture through summer internships or other opportunities. In this way, CEL helped students experience the host culture not simply as a place they visited, but as a place they came to know through relationships, routines, and personal connections.

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Conclusion

Culture is such a broad concept that it includes social practices, norms, and the ways people make sense of them through underlying beliefs and values. In many ways, it includes just about everything we do. Throughout this guidebook, we have explored how culture influences communication, participation and decision-making, and conflict management, and practical toolkits have been provided to support interculturally responsive program design. This guidebook serves as a springboard for CEL program leaders and participants to consider cultural factors more intentionally and to make more informed and reflective choices when engaging with community partners across cultures.

Carefully designed, culturally aware, and communicatively accommodating CEL abroad programs can be beneficial for all parties involved, including students, home and host institutions, community partners, and the broader communities in the host culture. Such collaborative engagement, in turn, can strengthen intercultural friendships, improve intergroup attitudes, and encourage more meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial intercultural engagement in the future.

Hope you enjoy a meaningful and deeply fulfilling CEL abroad experience!