

Report on the "Building of Cultures" International Seminar on August 2-4, 1992 in Gotemba, Japan

Carsten BUNDGAARD and Yoshihide HORIUCHI

Abstract

The "Building of Cultures" Intercultural Seminar was held in Gotemba, Japan in August, 1992 as the first Seminar outside Europe. The research question was whether this Seminar, developed with European value system and culture works with Japanese participants or not. As it turned out, the Seminar worked very well, with a significant impact on the participants' worldview and view toward foreign cultures. During the Seminar, it was discovered that the Europeans are more open, joyful, and communicative than the Japanese in the preparation stage of the Culture Game, however, in the final cultural exchange stage, the Japanese were open, joyful and communicative while the Europeans became more serious. Helpful hints for future Seminars were also gathered.

Background

The content of the Seminar has been developed from several years of experience of making seminars in international organizations such as Red Cross and Children's International Summer Villages (C. I. S. V.) by Bundgaard.

The individual programs and exercises of the Seminar are composed with intention to give the participants an overall and general introduction to an international career, dealing with attitudes which are blocking the development of comprehensive interhuman relations: prejudices, preconceived ideas on personal and cultural sets of values, and things we do not understand and are afraid of. It is the aim of the Seminar to give the participants an experience which will influence their own personal readiness to meet and to deal with people from other cultures, which are different from their own.

Conducting the Seminars with European participants in the past have demonstrated that our intentions are fulfilled.

The Seminar is built upon the European ideology in the sense that it aims at the individual experiences, attitudes and conclusions

of each participant. The methodology is also European following a kind of "Laboratory Method" of isolated environment from the outside world for the duration of the Seminar. The individual deliberations, the group discussions and the exchange of views in the whole group at the end are the result. This also means that there are no predetermined, desirable final conclusions to achieve; each individual develops one's own conclusions. Thus, the Seminar is mainly process-oriented, providing the framework for each participant to develop their own worldview. With this in mind we wanted to test if the Seminar would have the intended effect on Japanese participants, coming from a predominantly group-oriented society.

We have decided to carry out the Seminar in Japan during the summer in 1992. The seminar was successfully implemented from August 2nd until August 4, 1992.

The roles of the staff were as follows: Carsten Bundgaard was the instructor of the Seminar; Takako Bundgaard was the interpreter between Danish and Japanese as well as an assistant instructor; while Horiuchi participated in the Seminar as a participant in order to conduct the participant observation, as well as he organized the Seminar on the Japan side.

Carsten Bundgaard, Euro-Japan Communication Inc., Gentofte, Denmark.

Participants

There were twelve participants, including Horiuchi in the Seminar. They were six male and six female participants, which enabled us to make three groups with four members each; two male and two female. The eleven student-participants were of the age between eighteen to twenty-five, and nine were students at the School of Administration and Informatics, and the School of International Relations of the (Prefectural) University of Shizuoka. One participant was a student at the School of Engineering, the (National) Shizuoka University, while another was from Seijo University, studying European culture.

Before this Seminar, only a few had international experience over an extended period. All the participants have desires to be involved in international activities in the future, in other countries as well as in Japan.

Schedule of Events

On the first day, the Seminar started at 4 p.m. on August 2nd and continued until 10 p.m. On the second day, August the 3rd, we started at 9 a.m. and ended at 10 p.m. On the third day, August 4th, we started at 8:30 a.m. and ended at 3 p.m. The schedule was based on experiences from Seminars in Denmark and Europe.

Timetable

The First Day (August 2nd):

Afternoon: Introduction to the Seminar
Introduction of the participants
Participants' expectation of
the seminar
Introduction of the groups
Each group creates
its own identity
Presentation of
the group identity
(5 hours)

This long introduction session aimed at giving each participant an identity, feeling con-

fident in the group where s/he belongs to. Through the various exercises the participants became acquainted with each other, and the identity has been established by each group giving themselves a name, a logo, and a slogan. The theme "Building of Cultures" is also introduced in this part.

Evening: Prejudices/Judgments on
cultural values (1) (2 hours)

The participants were confronted with motives from their nearby surroundings in their own country. They are requested to give statements, positive and negative, about these motives. The exercise aims at giving the participants a recognition, that culture is a many-sided thing, and that we as human-beings are likely to give judgments on cultures different from ours.

The Second Day (August 3rd):

Morning: Prejudices/Judgments on
cultural values (2) (1 hour)

The participants were confronted with statements about people from a foreign country and requested to decide whether they are true or not. The exercise aimed at giving the participants a recognition that not all statements are true as well as they are not always with prejudices.

I and the others (1) (3 hours)

It was the aim, through the exercises, to show each participant that they individually are a part of a group; that the strengths and weakness of each member of the group adds to the strengths and weaknesses of the whole group; that each group is a part of the whole group of participants; and that the final result of the Seminar also depends on the general will of the participants to cooperate among the groups.

Afternoon: I and the others (2) (1 hour)
I and the others (3) (1 hour)
Own cultural background (3 hours)

It was the aim, through the exercises, to make each participant realize that wherever s/he moves to, s/he brings along a "cultural baggage." Each participant is asked about their own personal cultural background; each group adds various personal backgrounds of each member into a total of cultural identity. The whole group of participants are requested to discuss and to give a definition of the national identity. (Due to time shortage, this exercise on own cultural background was not fully completed. We agree with one of the participants stating that this part should be, "either a full exercise or just a brief on the theme." The exercise is very important and we will make a full exercise next time.)

Evening: Preparation for
the Culture Game:
Groups arrange their own rooms
(2 hours)

This is a simulation game with the aim for each participant to experience a "real" cultural exchange. In the beginning of the game, each group is handed out various figures and they are told to define the cultural content of these figures. They are told to decorate their rooms according to their wishes and identity. They are also told that they must build a new language different from any language they know. Finally, they are told that they must create their own routines in daily life as well as their own ceremonies, based on their own new culture. When this preparation has been completed by each group, the exchange will take place, and the participants will have to communicate through the language they have built, with the values and routines they have prepared.

The evaluation of the Culture Game by each participant is of high priority because of the strong impact of the Game on each participant.

The Third Day (August 4):

Morning: Preparation for
the Culture Game (2 hours)
The Culture Game (1 hour)

Afternoon: Evaluation of the Culture Game
(2 hours)
Evaluation of the Seminar
(1 hour)

Facilities

Tozanso offered excellent facilities for this Seminar. A conference room was available, as well as one room for each group. A 200 meters' walk steep uphill from the conference room to the group rooms made it necessary to allow more time for walking in the schedule. The catering was excellent and the general atmosphere of Tozanso was giving an excellent frame for conducting the Seminar.

Content

The Seminar is built on 4 main themes:

1. Prejudices/Judgments on cultural values

We consider that for crosscultural communication, it is essential that an individual is able to question their own preconceived opinions about others, as well as to consider one's own prejudices for oneself and other people's preconceived ideas for themselves.

This theme is intended to give each participant a notion that not all statements about others are with prejudices; and that not all conflicts are caused by cultural differences. It is in the meeting and the interactions between people crosscultural communication is accomplished, regardless of their backgrounds.

2. I and the others

We consider it important, in order to work efficiently in new contexts of a foreign culture, that the single person is able to consider the strengths and weaknesses of the person himself/herself as well as of the groups they are a part of.

This theme is aimed at giving each participant a notion that a group consists of individuals, and that the strength of the group depends on the collective capabilities of each individual member of the group. No matter where one is, s/he is a part of various groups. The efficiency of his/her work consists of the strengths and weaknesses of the groups s/he is a part of.

3. Own cultural background

It is important that a person going international is openminded to things which are not immediately understandable; that s/he shows humility towards the values of a foreign culture; that s/he shows respect to each person's values.

It is equally important that the personal identity, based on own cultural backgrounds, professional capacity as well as own experience, is recognized by the person him/herself. Meeting with other cultures is always an exchange, where person meets another person each with his/her own personal backgrounds and identity.

4. Building of Cultures

From the start and throughout the seminar, cultures are built by the groups, which have already been formed at the beginning of the seminar. Each group will be working together all through the seminar, and they will be having their own rooms privately.

They are requested to arrange and decorate their rooms according to their wishes. This building process is going on from the first day's introduction, through the discussions of the single issues, and it is culminating in the Culture Game on the last day.

5. During the Culture Game

The participants experience an intercultural exchange, both as hosts and as guests; an experience which is very close to the real experience of being guests in

a foreign culture or receiving guests from a foreign culture.

Notes on the 4 and 5 above

Each group built completely different cultures from each other group during the three days of the Seminar. The groups were given the same surroundings, the same opportunities, the same materials to use, and they were given exactly the same instruction; yet they developed their own cultures very differently from each other group. During the exchange-exercise of the Culture Game, the participants experience the feeling (not the rational thinking) of how it is to meet with people they do not understand.

At this Seminar, three different cultures were established: The first group defined themselves from the start as "Sari Sari," meaning the land of many things. They built their culture in accordance with this theme as they used many elements and things to decorate their room, not only focusing on one or two things.

The second group defined themselves as Canopus, which is the farthest detected star. This way they signalized their connection to the universe and the universality in our lives. Also, they consequently followed their firstly defined identity.

The third group gave themselves the name, Burbon. This is a fantasy name with no meaning. At the introduction, the group promised to find their identity during the course of the Seminar. So they did. They became a working culture producing airplanes and with deep roots in religion.

Observed Differences between European and Japanese Participants

The difference observed were not in the end-results, but in the process. In Europe, we start solving a given task although we do not quite understand the full meaning of it in the beginning. We ask questions when necessary during the exercise. On the contrary, in Japan, we discovered that it is important for the participants to fully understand every aspect of a

given task before starting to solve. The staff were seriously concerned during the Seminar, because we are used to the noise of discussions, the laughter, the loud arguments and the full energy during the preparation phases in the European Seminars.

This Gotemba Seminar was very silent in all the preparation phases, with participants speaking very quietly and wondering where they were heading.

On the other hand, in Europe, once the conclusions are made, the participants are usually very quiet, because they have discussed the issues thoroughly in the respective groups. In Japan the concluding sessions were very lively, with good discussions based on serious deliberations, and with laughter and good humor.

This difference culminated in the Culture Game, where the preparation phase in Japan was done in complete silence, where we are used to noise and laughter in Europe. While the exchange phase is usually very quiet in Europe, but at Gotemba, we experienced a very joyful exchange despite the frustration of not understanding other groups' cultures..

We have learned to be more specific when describing the tasks which all groups will have to do maybe even in written Japanese. This way we might be able to facilitate the preparation phases at all levels.

Rather than making drastic conclusions on these differences between Europe and Japan, it is sufficient to state that they maybe derive from a significant difference on how we have learned to approach a problem solution.

Conclusion

Conducting this Seminar with Japanese students as participants, has been a highly learning experience. In the overall perspective we find that the implementation was successful and that the results were according to our aims. We also found that adjustments must be made in order to achieve the full effect of the Seminar which is intended by us.

1. Language. The Seminar is conducted in English translated into Japanese and vice

versa. This is necessary to secure full understanding by all participants as well as by the staff of the Seminar.

2. Timing. The time we had allocated for the Seminar was too short. More time has to be given to the discussions in the groups, as well as the interpretation English/Japanese will require some time. The timetable of the Seminar must be balanced so that the participants will feel they are under pressure of time, and yet they will be able to deliver a satisfactory result of their work.

Also a more detailed introduction to each activity will be needed. Especially, the Culture Game will need more time during all the phases of the game: preparation, implementation, and follow-up. We scheduled this game to last for 3 hours. We recommend it to last for 5 hours.

3. Participants. The participants were selected and given a short briefing before they applied for their participation. Their expectations were in some cases different from the actual content. The evaluations from the participants, though, showed us that our aims were fulfilled and that the participants had invaluable experience of intercultural awareness for their future international work.

The balance of male and female participants was equal. This resulted in a good working atmosphere both in the groups and in the whole seminar. An equal share of male and female participants should be secured as much as possible at this Seminar. The total number of 12 participants must be considered the absolute minimum. It is the ideal number of participants, when 3-4 groups can be established with 5-6 participants in each group.

4. Facilities. The conference room and group rooms were far away from each other. Although this was only of little inconvenience, we recommend a closer po-

sition between the rooms. This will facilitate a better timing and a more intimate atmosphere.

5. Methodology. In their evaluations after the Seminar, some of the participants mentioned that they had felt extremely tired during the sessions, because they had never tried to work this way, where they have to think about themselves, discuss with others, and where answers to the questions were not given; where the questions asked are having several correct answers depending on the conclusions of the considerations and the discussions.

Also the frustrations and the uncertainty of participants as the program went along added to this tiredness. All of this is to a certain degree intended, and is to be considered as a part of the program.

One participant said that he was in a state of confusion throughout the Seminar, but that, when he found a hidden stone in another groups presentations during the culture exchange in the Culture Game, he suddenly grasped the meaning and the intentions of the whole Seminar. Such a feeling and recognition is not very far from the experience of staying and working in a foreign culture far away from home.

The method of two parallel developments (considerations and discussions on general issues, and the building of culture) proved to be efficient in order to reach the aims and intentions of the Seminar. The concluding Culture Game gave a practical dimension to the theoretical discussions.

6. General Remarks. Throughout the Seminar, we as leaders, were stunned by the seriousness and dedication of the participants, which lead to the positive conclusion. It is our intention that the next step will be to test the Seminar with participants from the private business sector who are going to be trained for an international career.

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