

Guest learning and adaptation in the field: a Navajo case study

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Introduction

Inter-organisational relationships (IORs) are one of the common mechanisms used in implementing economic development projects, and are often formed for the purpose of technical assistance. In addition, many IORs in the development context are formed between organisations representing populations that are culturally dissimilar and have a history of conflict that has resulted in inequality.¹ Individuals from one organisation, usually representing a more powerful group, are assigned and relocated to another in order to bring specialised skills to deal with development problems faced by the host organisation. Because these individuals are new to the organisation, I refer to them as *guests*. Often, guests work closely with members of the host organisation, whom I refer to as *hosts*, to achieve project goals. This article explores a particular problem encountered by guests when they try to draw on knowledge from their home culture to address problems in a host context. In particular, guests bring expectations and values to a project that may or may not be appropriate in the new milieu. The paper explores how guests contribute effectively to the achievement of development goals through a process of learning.

The central argument is that the ability of guests to provide effective technical assistance in a development project requires them to learn about local realities and to adapt in consonance with this understanding (Dyck *et al.* 2000). A guest's contribution is effective if his/her task-related activities result in the accomplishment of project goals as defined by the host. By definition, learning refers to a change in understanding regarding a problematic situation which then leads to a change in behaviour. Adaptation refers to the kind of change that a guest undergoes as a result of the learning process, and involves the revision of *a priori* assumptions and the acquisition of new ideas and

constructs that allow the individual to understand previously confusing behaviours and points of view of people within the new cultural milieu. Such an understanding enables the guest to appreciate the constraints and opportunities in the new cultural context, and provides a basis for exercising judgement about what issues need to be addressed and how their own technical knowledge and skill can best be brought to bear.

Successful adaptation is a difficult and impressive accomplishment. It is difficult because learning from hosts requires that guests confront, manage, and explore the discomfort and ambiguity resulting from the disruption of expectations. It is impressive because learning in a new cultural context involves working through disorientation and confusion to make 'sense' of a situation that is not 'sensible' from one's prior frame of reference (Carroll 1990). Furthermore, when there are historical power differences, the outsider's approach to the confusing situations s/he encounters has an impact on his or her ability to cultivate helpful relationships with hosts. Thus, skills and practices that enable guests to learn involve managing power and cultural differences.

Adaptation involves what I call *cross-cultural communicative competence*,² a term I use to refer to the skill involved in managing expectations based in prior acculturation experiences so as to learn in intercultural relationships. The presence or absence of these competencies is manifested in a guest's learning practices. Cross-cultural communicative competence can be said to be present when the guest behaves in a way that makes possible the generation of relevant information and explanations, thereby rendering previously confusing cues sensible, and facilitating the identification of issues that need attention. This article focuses on one aspect of such practices, which I refer to as *acts*.³ Acts are the things said and done in a given interaction that encourage or inhibit the surfacing and exploration of issues relevant to a task-related problem. Drawing on a Navajo case study, this article explores guest acts that enabled a guest to learn and adapt to a new cultural and organisational milieu. This article seeks to describe what is involved in the competent employment of such acts.

The learning process is triggered by a problem (Dewey 1938). For the guests, the confusion that arises from their inability to give meaning to a task-relevant cue is a problem that needs to be resolved. In this situation, individuals seek others who may be able to help them do this, and learning takes place in these interactions (Brown and

Duguid 2000; Lave and Wenger 1991). As a newcomer to a cultural milieu, the guest initially experiences confusion and disorientation, and this makes taking action problematic (Hall 1981). This confusion stems from the fact that the ways things are done in the new setting differ significantly from the other organisational contexts in which the guest has participated. Consequently, s/he lacks the frame of reference for interpreting what s/he encounters in the new milieu, and for devising an effective plan of action (Hall 1981). Without an understanding of the local milieu, ideas emanating from the guest's untested assumptions may be misplaced, inappropriate, resisted, and consequently lead to actions that prove ineffectual in achieving project goals. Learning about the host organisational context needs to take place before outside knowledge can be brought to bear on local problems. This involves managing prior expectations in a manner that facilitates learning and adaptation.

The notion of participation has an important place in both the development and learning literatures. Development scholars have argued that participation of the right actors is critical for democracy and practical from the perspective of achieving sustainable solutions to development problems (e.g. White 1996). Learning theorists have argued that the resolution of problems requires consultation with those people who understand the breadth of relevant issues (Brown and Duguid 2000). Participation of the right people facilitates learning by enabling such issues to be identified, promoting an accurate interpretation of the problem, and generating appropriate solutions. This article argues that learning and adaptation are optimised when guests seek information and guidance from hosts and when they are skilled in doing so. By suggesting that it is not only *who* participates, but *how*, the paper adds another dimension to the problem of participation.

I will illustrate the use of *acts*, one aspect of guest learning practices, through a description of the activities of Tom, an 'Anglo' guest involved in an economic development project on the Navajo nation.⁴ Specifically, it shows how Tom uses acts, and analyses what made them effective in his learning. Tom is a member of an organisation involved in an IOR. This IOR was between the Navajo Membership Organisation (NMO), and an Anglo organisation, Development Training Associates (DTA).⁵ This article discusses the Canyon Inn project, in which Tom was successful in learning about the local milieu and making an effective contribution.

My analysis of Tom's acts suggests that part of the skill involved in guest learning is one of maintaining a delicate balance between prior expectations and confusing 'cues' encountered in the new cultural milieu. Engaging in two complementary categories of acts – calibrating and progressing – creates this balance. Calibrating allows the guest to assess the appropriateness of his or her assumptions in the new context. Progressing allows the guest to elicit information and explanations that would help in developing an understanding of the context. Thus, calibration involves managing *a priori* expectations in such a way that these do not block information-seeking behaviour, accomplished through progressing acts.

The case and project

Below, I describe the inter-organisational relationship, the roles of IOR members and their activities, the host organisation, the project, and the guest organisational member.

The inter-organisational relationship

The relationship between NMO and DTA has been in existence for approximately ten years. The idea for this IOR emerged in conversations between members of the two organisations in a chance meeting at a conference of US federal grant recipients. In this conversation, the NMO representatives learned of DTA's provision of technical assistance in small business development to organisations in transitional economies. The DTA organisational member learned of NMO's training activities in a wide variety of areas, integrating Western and Navajo knowledge. At this meeting, a mutual interest in forming an IOR was expressed. The NMO members indicated that there was a need for small business development on the Navajo Nation and that there might be interest at NMO in developing training programmes in the area. The DTA representative expressed an interest in expanding DTA's technical assistance work to organisations within the USA in communities facing difficult economic circumstances. The IOR evolved from the efforts of these and other individuals within DTA and NMO.

Roles and activities

Within DTA, the IOR is part of an existing programme called the Collaborative Economic Development Initiative (CEDI), and it is administered by the president's office. The work of the IOR proceeds

with activities involving members of both organisations in two phases. The first phase stretches approximately from autumn to spring, and the second phase is during the summer. The project described in this article occurred during the summer of 1998.

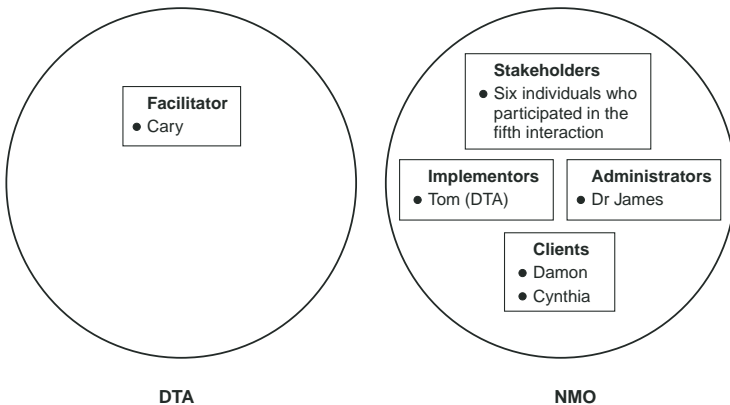
The NMO and DTA organisational members play one of three roles during the summer phase: administrators, facilitators, and implementers. While administrators and facilitators are on the permanent staff, implementers are temporary employees. A fourth role is that of client, an NMO staff member with ultimate administrative responsibility for the project.

In the summer, DTA hires implementers to provide NMO with short-term technical assistance in projects selected by NMO organisational members. Their chief activity is to carry out tasks aimed at achieving NMO project goals. Hence, the DTA implementers leave their organisational and cultural milieu and are transplanted to NMO for approximately four months. There, they are expected to work closely with a counterpart implementer as well as with NMO facilitators and a project client. Figure 1 depicts the actors from both DTA and NMO who served in these roles in the Canyon Inn project.

The host organisation

Arriving at NMO, one is immediately struck by the circular design of the compound and buildings, the circle being a crucial element in Navajo cosmology. An asphalt road runs around buildings that house a variety of offices. Almost all of the buildings are designed in the

Figure 1: Actors in the Canyon Inn Project



circular form of a traditional Navajo home called a *hogan*. This architectural environment is the first message a guest receives about a core organisational value: the maintenance of Navajo culture. Indeed, NMO is a membership organisation whose mission is to provide training in a number of areas in keeping with Navajo cultural practices. As I will discuss later, addressing this issue was critical to the legitimisation of any project undertaken at NMO.

Canyon Inn

Tourism is a major growth industry on Native American reservations and a potential arena of job creation and income generation for many Navajo families (Cornell and Kalt 1995). However, there is a general view on Navajoland and in NMO that, because of very limited infrastructure (e.g. outlets for Navajo arts and crafts, restaurants, and hotels), tourists tend to pass through Navajoland without staying long enough to spend their money. With the exception of a community called Kayenta, either the tribal government or non-Navajos own the few existing businesses on the Navajo Nation. Furthermore, these outlets capture only a fraction of tourist spending.

Consequently, there was a desire at NMO to promote jobs in the tourism sector by providing training to would-be micro-entrepreneurs. Many NMO members are skilled craftspeople producing goods such as rugs and jewellery. Others have *hogans*, which they could upgrade for use as inns. In order to promote the involvement of their members in the tourism business, the business division of NMO had developed a hospitality programme.

NMO organisational members hoped that Canyon Inn, a bed and breakfast establishment owned and managed by NMO, would be a training tool in the hospitality programme and more generally a means of addressing the unemployment problem. While they recognised that this enterprise might also generate profit, they distinguished this from their primary purpose of using Canyon Inn as a training tool for how to manage a bed and breakfast enterprise. Canyon Inn is a round red-brick building encircled by a concrete walkway leading to two separate entrances on the north and south side of the *hogan*-like structure. The interior is also circular and wide open, with very high ceilings. A huge fireplace raised on a stone base is located in the centre. The smokestack, enclosed in a black tube, extends through the roof. The Inn is very bright during the day from the light shining into the central core.

The guest member

Tom is an energetic Anglo-American. He is a man with a keen sense of responsibility and described himself as ‘an intense and passionate person’ who, when faced with a task, likes to ‘give it his all’. Having grown up in a family of small businesspeople, he had been entrusted with significant responsibilities from a very young age. He explained that if you want a small business to survive, you have to be a ‘self-motivated’ and a ‘self-directed’ person. You have to make sure that you have done everything in your power to meet the needs of current or prospective customers, and this may mean going above and beyond the call of duty. He told me that he was a ‘practical person’ and that he ‘hated bureaucracy’. The qualities he valued – self-motivation and self-direction – were particularly important to understanding his point of view in this project.

By the time Tom undertook the project, he had spent a couple of months at NMO. During this time, he learned that his Navajo counterparts might not wish to move into action as quickly as he would like. He also learned that, unless an activity was clearly linked to NMO’s mission, it would not enjoy the support of its members.

The evolution of the project

Below, I describe five interactions between Tom and NMO organisational members in an attempt to resolve a core problem of NMO’s commitment to the Canyon Inn project, focusing on Tom’s changing understanding of the commitment issue.

First interaction

Tom began his involvement with the project by talking to several individuals regarding the operation of Canyon Inn. From his conversations and observations, he concluded that a major problem with the inn was the lack of an ‘active’ manager.

He first approached Cynthia McDermott, a trainer in the business division. Cynthia did not show any interest in the managerial issue. Instead, she asked Tom to write a business plan. However, she left for an extended period of time shortly thereafter. Upon her departure, no one at NMO expressed interest in working on the project. Thus, Tom concluded that there was no interest in or commitment to it, and he decided to invest his time elsewhere.

However, the hesitation on the part of NMO members was not due to a lack of interest but to a concern about the ambiguity of Canyon

Inn's purpose. Several individuals said that NMO's mission was training, not managing a business, and therefore there would be support for Canyon Inn only if it were framed as a training tool, and not as a profit-making enterprise. However, since these concerns were not raised at this time, no progress was made, and Tom did not learn what was required to pursue the project.

The project was reinitiated during the mid-point evaluation, when all IOR members pause to assess their progress on summer projects and decide how to address any problems. Cary, the DTA administrator, became aware that no progress had been made on the project, and in consultation with Cary, Tom decided to assess NMO's commitment to this project before expending further time and resources.

Second interaction

Tom's first meeting after the mid-point evaluation was with NMO clients Damon Wright and Cynthia, who by now had returned to NMO. Damon was in charge of the Office of Community Development (OCD), responsible for connecting NMO to the community through economic development activities. His office was involved because there were questions about the role it might play in managing Canyon Inn. Cynthia's primary goal was to use the inn for training NMO members in small business development.

The main topic was NMO's commitment to the Canyon Inn project. Several facets of the commitment issue were identified. The first was support from top management. Damon and Cynthia told Tom to talk with the Vice President, Dr George James, and assess his commitment to the project. A second facet concerned who would manage Canyon Inn. Both Damon and Cynthia were hesitant about assuming day-to-day managerial responsibilities: Cynthia said that, at present, the business division did not have the capacity, and Damon was concerned about assuming this responsibility without unambiguous and explicit support from top management. This issue was resolved up to a point in that Damon and Cynthia developed a proposal that Tom was to present to Dr James. The proposal was that an individual solely responsible for management of the inn should be hired. For the first three years, this person would report to Damon's office. After that time, the business division would assume responsibility for day-to-day management of the inn.

Tom raised his concern about the lack of an 'active manager', whom he described in terms of interpersonal traits and behaviour as being

'forthcoming', 'active', and 'greeting customers'. Furthermore, he envisaged the active manager as someone who would organise a variety of interesting activities in the inn, such as cultural presentations. Cynthia responded by saying that these types of activities would be carried out by trainers. In response to this suggestion, Tom dropped the topic.

Tom's concern was deeper than was apparent in this exchange. Although Cynthia's response suggested that the active manager could be understood in terms of a person who performs certain activities, Tom was describing what in his mind constituted an ideal type. He was describing subtle interpersonal skills and attitudes that had particular meanings regarding service work in his own cultural setting. However, Cynthia's response and Tom's reaction left unexplored several questions regarding the applicability and meaning of these cues in the Navajo context.

An additional issue concerned the purpose of Canyon Inn. Tom asked whether Canyon Inn was envisaged as a 'training tool' or a 'profit centre'. Both Damon and Cynthia told him that the inn would only receive support if it was framed as a training activity. From Tom's perspective, however, the inn could serve both purposes. If it were to generate a profit, it would ease the financial burden on NMO to keep it running. Given the apparent reluctance of NMO members to envisage the inn as a profit-generating entity, he did not push the matter further at the time. However, the host's insistence that Canyon Inn be framed solely as a training tool did not fully make sense to him.

From interviews with NMO members, I learned what might explain their reluctance to view Canyon Inn as a profit-generating entity. They explained that there was considerable concern about the loss of Navajo culture at NMO. The organisation itself had been formed in an attempt to maintain Navajo culture. Thus, any initiative perceived as potentially threatening to this mission was resisted. Some individuals argued that profit seeking went counter to Navajo values. For them, the motivation for fostering entrepreneurial activity was to enable community members to earn a living on the Navajo Nation so that they would not have to leave the reservation to seek jobs elsewhere. Other NMO organisational members were concerned that if Navajos did not find a way of marketing their resources, outsiders would capture the tourist market. They argued that it was possible to maintain traditional values while responding to external forces.

Another concern with defining Canyon Inn as a profit-generating entity had to do with the institutional environment of the Navajo

economy. Some argued that the business environment on the Navajo Nation made it difficult to engage in micro-entrepreneurial activity. This was a thorny issue that raised a fundamental question about the efficacy of training in small business. Yet many argued that this was the only way to address the severe unemployment problem. There were, however, no easy answers or ways to resolve the complex problem of maintaining cultural values while at the same time fostering entrepreneurial activity on Navajoland.

If Canyon Inn were to be used as a training tool, it needed to be linked to the business division's hospitality programme. Thus, a final facet of NMO's commitment was the status of the proposed programme. In the course of its discussion, the group realised that there was uncertainty regarding the business division's readiness to implement this programme. Cynthia offered to clarify this matter. In the meantime, Tom was to meet with the senior administrator, Dr James, to assess whether there was top management support for the project, and whether there was support for the management proposal.

Tom entered this interaction with the idea that the active manager was a key issue for successfully achieving the goals of the Canyon Inn project. During the course of the conversation, however, this issue fell to the bottom of the list of priorities, and other issues which the clients felt were crucial came to the fore, i.e. day-to-day management, the hospitality programme, and support from top management. Thus, Tom's awareness of the relevant issues expanded considerably.

Third interaction

Dr James strongly reiterated what Tom had already heard with respect to purpose – that there was support for Canyon Inn as long as it was intended for training. He indicated his support but told Tom that it was necessary to secure the backing of Dr Jason Alexander, the president of NMO, who oversaw all administrative activities. Dr James also noted that without clear commitment from the business division, Canyon Inn's purpose would not be realised and inaction would reinforce the perception that nothing was happening on the project. Dr James recommended that Tom meet with both Dr Alexander and Barbara Clemens, the head of the business division, to ascertain that unit's commitment, to which Tom agreed.

Interestingly, in his exchange with Dr James, Tom did not raise the issue of Canyon Inn's profit-generating capacity. His understanding of the issues involved was expanded and deepened in this meeting. It

was expanded by obtaining new information concerning the need for Dr Alexander's support, and by securing Dr James' backing for both the project and the managerial proposal. It was deepened because some issues, such as the purpose of Canyon Inn and the importance of the hospitality programme, were reiterated. However, Tom's concerns regarding the active manager and the profit-generating potential of Canyon Inn lingered on.

Fourth interaction

As planned, Tom spoke with Barbara about the business division's vote on the hospitality programme and its plans for using Canyon Inn as a training facility within it. The business division had voted to move forward on the hospitality programme, but Barbara told Tom that the division could not manage Canyon Inn. She was willing, however, to talk further about how Canyon Inn could be used as a training tool within the context of the hospitality programme. Tom did not speak with Dr Alexander regarding his support for the programme.

Fifth interaction

At this juncture, a decision was made to convene all the relevant stakeholders and discuss the remaining issues and their implications for NMO, as well as for Tom's workplan. Present at the meeting were the IOR members involved up to this point (Cynthia, Damon, Barbara, Dr James, and Tom), along with four new individuals.

The group revisited the key aspects of the commitment issue, most of which were resolved. However, for Tom, there were still problems with the purpose and management issues. These concerns were raised one last time in this meeting. Tom argued that while the focus of the meeting was to discuss how to use Canyon Inn, the enterprise could also be a viable profit-generating entity. This elicited two strong statements. The first person indicated that NMO would not support the project unless it was aligned with NMO's mission. The second told Tom that that NMO was not interested in making 'millions of dollars':

We are not a money-making institution, we are a non-profit training institution. Even in the business division they are not managers. No one in this institution is a manager. This project can be a unique opportunity for our Navajo members to learn what it takes to be a successful business person on the Navajo Nation. So as a training programme I support it since it is consistent with our mission.

This was the clearest and strongest statement underscoring what Tom had learned regarding this issue and put unequivocal closure to the purpose question. It was not contested further.

Tom also raised the issue of the active manager. He explained that Canyon Inn needed 'a single accountable person' who could handle everything. This issue was redefined as a problem of hiring a manager for the inn, a concern that had been expressed by the clients. The qualities this individual should exhibit, an issue of concern to Tom, did not seem to register. The group agreed that a manager should be hired.

With most of the commitment-related issues resolved, the meeting focused on implementation. Rather than going into this next phase, I will instead turn to an analysis of the interaction and in particular of how Tom's evolving understanding of the commitment issue was accomplished through learning acts.

Learning practices in a new cultural context

I have described Tom's evolving understanding of the commitment issue in five interactions. Tom began this project with the intention of working on the problem of the active manager. Before doing so, however, he wanted to be sure of NMO's commitment to Canyon Inn. The commitment problem turned out to be multi-faceted and complex. Furthermore, the aspects and issues that were explicitly discussed and resolved were the organisational dimensions of the commitment problem, not its underlying *value dimensions*. Differences in perspective between Tom and NMO organisational members arose around the issue of the active manager and the purpose of Canyon Inn. As suggested above, underlying these differences were deeper issues rooted in cultural and historical experiences. The cross-cultural literature suggests that such value differences can be a major stumbling block to learning (Hall 1981). Yet the results show that some degree of learning can be achieved even when underlying differences remain unresolved. This is possible when guests are skilful in managing differences. We now take a closer look at how such differences were managed and how this facilitated guest adaptation, through an analysis of Tom's acts. I will begin with conceptual ideas that will assist in this analysis.

Types of difference and resolution

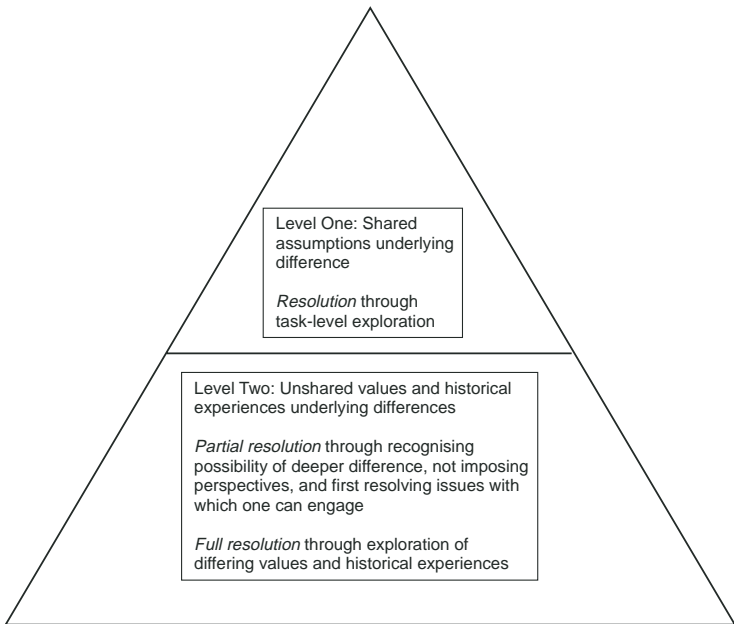
I would suggest that the resolution of the value aspects of a complex problem requires going beyond 'level-one issues' to explore 'level-two

issues'. Level-one issues are those where actors have differences in perspectives that can be resolved by implicitly drawing on shared premises or frames of reference. Although actors do not explicitly cite their shared assumptions, they render their differing perspectives mutually sensible with reference to these assumptions (Heritage 1984). In contrast, at level two, actors' differences in perspective are based on differing cultural values and historical experiences, and they lack a shared frame of reference for recognising one another's concerns as relevant or meaningful.

Thus, one problem with the resolution of such differences is whether the nature of the practices matches that of the differences. The two levels of the triangle in Figure 2 match the types of differences and types of exploration appropriate to resolving the differences in question. Task-focused conversations are sufficient to resolve level-one differences in perspective, while level-two issues are those whose meaning can only be established by considering the second level of the triangle – underlying value and historical differences. Part of engaging in practices that match the difference requires that actors recognise the nature of the difference when it is encountered. Mistaking a level-two for a level-one difference is a common problem in cross-cultural interactions, including those in development projects. Based on a mis-recognition, an actor may think that by appealing to what s/he assumes to be shared or universal values, or by trying to explain better, the other can understand and ideally accept a particular view. The question then is: what are the consequences of the mis-recognition of the type of difference and subsequent mismatch of practice?

Tom conveyed an awareness that things on the Navajo Nation and NMO in particular were very different from his home culture. He also expressed a strong interest in learning about Navajo culture and read a great deal about it. Ironically, he did not seem to recognise that the differences in perspective between himself and his counterparts with regard to the purpose of Canyon Inn and the active manager reflected such cultural differences and presented opportunities for learning about lived Navajo culture. Such mis-recognition has consequences for guest learning. One could conceivably deal with differences by imposing one's own perspectives. Tom did not do this. Although he did not show any awareness that the issues that he was confronting were potentially due to different cultural and historical experiences, he held his assumptions at bay and engaged with his partners on issues whose rationale he could understand. This suggests that, barring the ability to

Figure 2: Match between type of difference and exploration



engage in value exploration, there may be an intermediate level of dealing with level-two issues: not directly engaging with the hosts, not trampling over them, but first exploring common ground. Although Tom's acts did not allow for an exploration and resolution of deeper differences, they did facilitate the articulation of level-one issues.

Newcomer learning practices

The analysis of Tom's learning practices suggests that there are at least two broad categories of acts involved in guest learning: calibrating and progressing. Calibrating involves assessing the relevance of one's perspectives in a new setting in such a way that these are not imposed on partners. Progressing involves eliciting information and explanations to build one's understanding of the issues relevant to one's task.

Two specific acts fell within the calibrating category: probing and suppressing. These were used to manage level-two differences in perspectives. *Probing* involves stating one's perspectives 'lightly', while calibrating others' receptivity, and making adjustments based on the observed response. Probing can vary in its 'lightness' or subtlety. An

important aspect of probing is that the guest does not insist on his or her perspective but gently attempts to generate a discussion around the differing perspectives. In the first meeting, after Damon and Cynthia came up with a management proposal, Tom elaborated on the role he envisaged for the active manager. When Cynthia indicated that a trainer could handle this, Tom did not offer further explanations, but turned to another issue. We saw a more insistent probe by Tom in the fifth meeting, where he tried to pursue the issues of profit and the active manager for one last time. This type of probing was risky because, as happened in this instance, the suggestion that the inn might be used for profit elicited a strongly negative reaction from one of the hosts.

A second calibrating act is *suppressing* one's views. Tom did this in all three meetings. Although he felt strongly about the active manager and profit issues, recognising his hosts' lack of readiness to deal with them, he repeatedly changed the topic to elicit their views. Although this expanded his understanding in other areas, their responses to the active manager and profit issues left him not fully convinced.

These two acts enabled Tom to manage level-two issues in such a way that the articulation of level-one issues was not blocked. Tom's practices in the category of progressing acts were used to surface level-one issues. Four observed acts in this category were: stating his point of departure, focusing attention, asking questions, and summarising.

Stating one's point of departure involves defining a problem that is inhibiting one's progress on a task. Tom did this at the outset of the first meeting by stating DTA's concern that Canyon Inn was not a priority for NMO. Before undertaking the project, he wanted to assess NMO's commitment to it. Stating a position in this manner is not advocating for any substantive solution to a problem. That is, it is not a statement of what the commitment issue should entail or how it should be resolved. Instead, it sets up a problem that requires joint resolution. This practice was intended to generate a discussion, and it was received in this spirit.

Focusing attention on the problem of commitment was a second act that facilitated progress. This was accomplished by returning to an unresolved issue when an intervention had shifted the conversation in a new direction. This occurred early in meeting one. Tom began by stating that he had called the meeting in order to resolve the issue of commitment. Cynthia responded by raising fairly detailed issues regarding the hospitality programme. However, Tom reframed her comments and directed the conversation back to the issue of commitment. The following excerpt illustrates this dynamic:

Tom: I would like to work on the Canyon Inn project, but I am concerned about the commitment from NMO. I want to clarify two things. Can you use me for the Canyon Inn project? And what is the commitment to the hospitality programme?

Cynthia: We want to have the hospitality programme in place by Fall, but we don't know if it will actually fall into place by then. These are the people you need to talk to: Barbara Clemens who is the head of the Business Division and Dr James. He's interested in the spin-off from business. You need to talk to the chapter people because if we do anything with Canyon Inn, we need to involve the chapter people because tourism has been discussed at the chapter level.⁶ Also, Abbot, who is someone in the community who has 19 dirt-floor hogans, needs to be consulted. He has talked to us about Canyon Inn. Also there is James Kirk and Angela Parks. We are planning to collaborate with them both on the programme.

Tom: Contacts are very useful, but I'm interested in whether it will be something that NMO is committed to and is useful for training purposes. Last year I understand the reports were written but they were not read, or no-one did anything with them.

Asking questions that open up a deeper exploration of a particular issue was another act. One type of question involved clarifying the meaning of an event. For instance, in the first meeting, Cynthia explained that the business division had 'voted unanimously in favour of the hospitality programme'. Tom responded by asking: 'What does it mean that the division has voted?' It turned out that Cynthia did not know whether this meant that the business division was ready to implement this programme in the near future. Another type of question that moved the conversation towards deeper exploration involved dissolving momentary confrontation between competing desires. For instance, Cynthia stated that she felt that Damon's office should take responsibility for managing Canyon Inn because the business division did not have the managerial capacity. Damon posed a rebuttal: 'Who is going to manage it? That is a huge problem.' At this point, Tom responded 'How should I find an answer?' This elicited a response from Damon about what his office could do and the conditions under which it could take on responsibility for Canyon Inn. This allowed the group to go into a discussion about what each party could do and what was needed. Finally, Tom posed questions to try to predict the future. For instance, he wanted to know the likely scenario

regarding how the management issue would be addressed in the following year if the proposal was not accepted or implemented.

Summarising the main issues being discussed and the steps that were agreed to by the group was a last progressing act observed in the first and second meetings. This provided an opportunity for others to add, elaborate, or raise different understandings if the summary had not captured the concerns of all involved parties.

Implications

This article began with the claim that a guest's ability to be effective in providing technical assistance in a development project evolves through a process of learning and adaptation. By the fifth meeting, Tom had a few weeks left at NMO, and it was decided that the best use of his remaining time was to write a business plan. In fact the client, Cynthia, had asked him to do this in the very first interaction. The reader may reasonably contend that carrying out this task did not require the four subsequent interactions between Tom and NMO members. In addition, the knowledge he acquired in these interactions was not necessary in order to write a business plan. However, I would argue that Tom's main contribution came from facilitating the resolution of the commitment problem through the process of learning that he generated.

Although the Canyon Inn project had started several years ago, no progress had been made in using it for its intended purpose: training. Hence, there was a widely shared perception at NMO that there was no commitment to Canyon Inn. By initiating a process of assessing the commitment issue, Tom helped NMO organisational members articulate what was needed to resolve this problem. We saw how the multi-faceted nature of this problem emerged in the five interactions. Specifically, resolving the commitment issue involved securing moral, programme, and human resource support from a variety of actors. By the fifth meeting, these issues had been resolved and NMO organisational members were moving towards considering implementation.

We have also argued that a guest's ability to learn in a new cultural context is a skilled accomplishment, which involves managing assumptions developed in prior acculturation experiences. Although Tom was not able fully to resolve level-two differences, he was able to manage these in such a way that they did not block the articulation of level-one issues. This allowed him to prevent any culture-based conflict. Further, by not imposing his own views, Tom successfully

managed the sensitivity of Navajos to the long history of cultural devaluation and external imposition by Anglos. This prevented what NMO organisational members report has been the common fate of outsiders who are referred to as a 'typical Anglo', namely, being ignored. If Tom had been unable to manage such dynamics, which are rooted in inter-group political history, he would not have been able to learn anything.

Despite this impressive accomplishment on Tom's part, an important aspect of the commitment issue, the cultural maintenance dimension, remained unresolved by a failure to explore issues that brought this dimension into relief. Both guests and hosts were concerned with the current efficiency and effectiveness of the management of Canyon Inn. How might Tom's ideas have been modified and applied to address these problems? Also, some at NMO were concerned with external actors taking over the tourism market. How could NMO provide training in small business management in accordance with Navajo values? How does this address the long-term problems in penetrating the business environment on the Navajo Nation?

Is the failure to resolve the underlying problem a reason for despair? I would argue that one has to understand what can be learned within such a project in the context of its short-term timeframe. By focusing on the issues that could be jointly understood, common ground was established, and further exploration could build on this in the future. It was the presence of a degree of cross-cultural communicative competence that facilitated what learning did occur. That is, Tom's practices involved a competent management of differences in a context of political inequality.

In light of these observations, a practical issue for development organisations concerns how guest workers may develop these types of skills. Anecdotal evidence suggests that while classroom training in cross-cultural communications skills provides useful information, it may not be easily transferable. Tom's acts were performed 'in-the-moment' without a chance for detached reflection. How can development organisations address the need for cross-cultural effectiveness in this type of situation? Although part of Tom's flexibility may have been due to personal characteristics, he also consulted various individuals about the differences he encountered and about how he should deal with these. Specific information on these exchanges is not available, but certainly some of these individuals had extensive experience working in

similar environments. This suggests that development organisations may be able to reinforce classroom training by providing ongoing consultation for development workers once they are in the field.

Finally, although it is evident that the hosts also played a role in the learning process described here, this aspect of the issue is beyond the scope of this article (but is discussed further in Debebe 2002). Suffice it to say here that hosts played a major role by focusing the conversations on the key issues that needed resolution without dismissing Tom's ideas, and by advising him on how to proceed at each stage of the process.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Richard Bagozzi, Jane Dutton, Martha Feldman, Joyce Fletcher, Kenneth Reinert, and Mayer Zald for helpful discussions related to this topic. I am especially grateful to Kenneth Reinert for kindly reading and commenting on an earlier draft of this article. Finally, I offer my thanks to the organisations that provided access, and the individuals who participated in the fieldwork described here.

Notes

- 1 There are many possible dimensions of inequality (e.g. financial, historical) that could be used to characterise the relationship between organisations. Here I focus on political inequality based on historical conflict between the groups that these organisations represent.
- 2 The term 'communicative competence' was coined by Dell Hymes (1972). This idea brings our attention to the interactive competencies involved in communication in particular cultural contexts. Similar ideas have been cited in cross-cultural research. Redmond (2000) used the term 'intercultural communication competence' and suggested that it included six dimen-

sions. Jacobson *et al.* (1999) used the term 'intercultural competence' to refer to the development of new strategies for managing interactions effectively in a new cultural context. In the organisational literature, ideas related to communicative competence have also emerged (Putnam and Kolb 2000; Fletcher 1999). For the interested reader, my use of this idea is described in Debebe (2002).

- 3 The other two aspects of learning practice are *interpretation* and *strategy formulation*. These aspects are explored elsewhere (Debebe 2002).
- 4 I use the term 'Anglo' to refer to the broad European-American culture rather than to British culture. In using the term in this way, my intention is not to deny the rich ethnic and cultural diversity within this group. I use this term because this diversity is not central to this analysis, but the dominant culture of which sub-groups are a part is relevant, and many scholars have referred to this dominant culture as 'Anglo' culture. Hereafter, it will appear without quotation marks.
- 5 To protect the anonymity of those concerned, all names of organisations, people, programmes, and project have been changed.
- 6 A chapter is the local government unit on the Navajo reservation.

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This paper was first published in Development in Practice (12/3&4:355-369) in 2002.