We recommend removing extraneous slides if this part of the module is embedded in a larger re-entry workshop. Too many slides, and too much text on the slides, can reinforce passive attitudes. The more active, engaged and responsive the students, the better they will find the workshop.

In addition, feel free to add your own slides, photos and stories, especially after you've run the workshops, and students have given you good examples to work with.
Cultural relativism & analysis
Cultural relativism & analysis

How do we understand the things that we encounter overseas?
Cultural relativism & analysis

The doctrine of cultural relativism suggests that one should try to judge and interpret the behavior of others in terms of *their traditions and experience*. This does not mean that one should not make judgments; it simply means that one should suspend judgment while engaged with aspects of that particular culture.

(Gordon 2010: 25, emphasis added)
The term ‘cultural relativism’ is used to describe a number of things; you have gained a skill that we call ‘cultural relativism.’

MORAL cultural relativism is the idea that actions can only be JUDGED, good or bad, right or wrong, in relation to the culture where they happen. Frequently glossed as, ‘When in Rome, do as the Romans.’ Condemned by many people as a personal philosophy.

MENTAL relativism has nothing to do with either converting (‘becoming a Roman’) or good and bad. Mental relativism is about understanding. Analytical, not personal or moral. Mental relativism means recognising that other systems work, that they function by their own rules, that there are other options. The question is not whether it is better or worse, but the effects of difference.

If education is different or gender relations or drinking habits, why? And to what effect? So what?
We believe that the best way to teach cultural relativism as a skill is to clearly distinguish it from moral relativism: leave judgment out of the equation as a separate issue.

Cultural relativism leads to greater understanding, not to either judging or refusing to judge.

If you want to judge somebody else's behaviour, judgment is a different step, we would argue, after you understand what they think they are doing. Cultural relativism helps with that earlier step: understanding how people’s actions or beliefs make sense to them or what motivates them.
Cultural practices: the burqa, for example

How do we understand a cultural practice, like wearing the burqa?

Does judging it get us any closer to understanding?

Taken near Balkh, Afghanistan.
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Original at http://www.flickr.com/photos/afqmatters/4324680171/

A controversial example of how cultural relativism might be used is in relation to the wearing of the burqa, the full body covering worn by women in public places in some Islamic societies.

In Australia, a Senator called it ‘un-Australian’, but also in the UK, Canada, Belgium, and especially France, the garment is controversial. For many people in the West, accustomed to liberal attitudes toward women’s clothing, the burqa is a symbol of women’s oppression, a physical way a woman is confined by religious custom, and may be considered a refusal by a Muslim to assimilate or become ‘modern.’

A cultural relative analysis asks, not what the burqa means to the observer, but what it means to the person who wears it, just as cultural relativism asks what does a practice mean relative to its own cultural context.

To return to our iceberg metaphor, what underlies the observable tip – the wearing of the burqa – in terms of cultural values, assumptions, expectations and practices?

For the burqa, the women who wear it often talk, not of being oppressed as women, but of the way that the clothing:

a) symbolizes their high status (not all women wear burqas),
b) their religious convictions (especially when the practice is under attack from non-Muslim critics or their religious life is being suppressed),
c) even the women’s freedom, because without the burqa, respectable women cannot travel about as freely in their societies. To demand that they wear a different mode of dress is tantamount to demanding that Western women wear less clothing than they would prefer, undermining their sense of security and respectability.

In fact, as anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) described, Muslim women can often get irritated that Westerners seem to be obsessed with banning the burqa as a way to ‘liberate’ Muslim women, and far less concerned that these same women go hungry, remain uneducated, or lack basic health care.

The point is not that the observer needs to ‘approve of’ wearing the burqa, or that ‘understanding’ means that the observer him- or herself wants to wear a burqa. In fact, a culturally relative analysis will also help outsiders to understand why some people are also deeply disturbed to see new refugees arriving in their societies who refuse to give up confusing, unfamiliar habits from the very societies that they are fleeing, like the wearing of a burqa.

The goal is to at least understand what a cultural practice means to those who do it, or, as the iceberg metaphor suggests, to understand the invisible assumptions, concepts and meanings that are below the surface, supporting the visible tip of cultural expression, not assume that the practice has the same meaning it would have if we ourselves were to do it.
How shall I talk of the sea to the frog, if it has never left his pond? How shall I talk of the frost to the bird of the summerland, if it has never left the land of its birth? How shall I talk of life with the sage, if he is prisoner of his doctrine?

Chung Tsu, 4th Century B.C.

Some students are very prone to rush to judgment of other people’s ways of life; especially first-time travelers may assume that any ‘comparison’ must necessarily involve evaluation, judgment, or choosing which practice or attitude is superior.

The rush to judgment can prevent students from engaging with other cultures or recognizing how they function on their own terms.
Best to go through a couple of examples provided by the students in the initial re-entry reflection workshop.

The point is to ask people to get beyond superficial understandings of difference.

Too often, when we ask students, ‘How was it different?’ the answers are superficial: foods, flags & festivals.

‘It was cold.’

OR students feel that they must compare home and host and decide which one is better, more sensible, more comfortable.

The point is not to judge, but to see more of the iceberg: if the food is different, why? so what? what are the effects?

If people don’t wear bike helmets, how can they do it? what’s the effect?

If healthcare was different, did it affect other students? Decisions they were making? The way issues were discussed in the news?
Brewer and Cunningham (2009:14) advocate a four-stage, ‘DIVE’ model for helping students to acquire the skills to learn experientially from cultural difference. Building upon earlier ideas from Bennett and colleagues (1977), Brewer and Cunningham advocate encouraging students to move through Description–Interpretation–Validation–Explanation to better understand cultural difference.

The DIVE model encourages students, not to reinforce stereotypes, snap judgments, or blanket generalizations, but rather to investigate, think of many possible interpretations, and try to imagine what another person’s perspective might be. For this reason, cultural relativism is both a powerful analytical method and a practical tool for interacting with people who do not share our own customs or perspectives in life.
Describe: As richly as possible with minimal judgment, either positive or negative, try to describe the practice, event or other feature of life.

The act of describing can help move students away from evaluating and comparing, asking them to study other ways of life or culture more closely with a measured eye so that they can get the details correct.

Encouraging good description also feeds curiosity and reinforces observation skills, helping to turn a student’s reflective skills on other people and ways of life, and not just their own learning and development (all of which are important, we hasten to add).
Interpret: In the second phase of the DIVE model, we encourage students to try to interpret a practice. Try:

- to understand why people do it,
- what it means to them, and
- possible origins for a practice.

Interpretation of any new experience is almost inevitable; the DIVE model in our approach stimulates a creative and open-ended interpretive phase, with students actively encouraged to think about multiple possible interpretations rather than settling on their most immediate reaction as a final verdict.

That is, tell them to think of multiple interpretations, not to be satisfied with the first that crosses their minds.
Verify: The crucial third phase of the DIVE model for cultural analysis is to verify or validate preliminary interpretations so that we can choose among alternative interpretations or test what we think is happening. Snap judgment sometimes does not stand up to verification, but many travelers never test their initial impressions.

Verification can happen through specific investigation, asking people in the host country, and examining whether our interpretation is part of a broader pattern.

Students who are in-country together sometimes ‘verify’ only by consulting with fellow students from their own home country. This narrow validation (a potentially very biased one) poses significant dangers, as homogeneous groups can simply confirm each other’s pre-existing prejudices, ethnocentric judgments and stereotypes.

Verifying instead with members of the host culture, or with visitors from other places (that is, other international students not from Australia, for example), can be enlightening, as they may have competing interpretations or see cultural practices in quite different light.

Explain: Once we have a validated interpretation, we can ask bigger questions about the source and significance of patterns of cultural difference. Explanation of cultural phenomena tends to be ‘restless,’ as students will learn that sometimes many interpretations are possible. This tentativeness is not just the result of their investigations being incomplete; cultural phenomena themselves are often quite complex, as multiple causes may feed into a single phenomenon, or a practice might mean different things in different contexts.
Ray’s visit to BAU house

Consult the instructor’s guide and the student resources for the materials to go over Ray’s experience with the Bau Haus. This is on pages 10-11 in the instructor’s guide for the Cultural Relativism and Interpretation module; and the exercise titled ‘Bau House Brainstorm’ in the student guide.
D.I.V.E

description

Tip
What are experience or perceive.

interpretation

verification

cultural underpinnings

explanation
Where do you hang out with your friends? Why is that?

What other options might you choose, and under what conditions?

What could someone visiting from overseas tell from your choice of hangout?

Would the Bau Haus do well in Australia? Why?

Judging from what Ray writes, do Koreans have similar relations to dogs as Australians do?

What sort of questions would you ask Ray to better interpret Bau Haus?

The exercise is described in greater detail in pages 37-38, including background information on attitudes towards dogs (including controversy within South Korea). The goal of the exercise is both to show the students how a good example of description can lead into interpretation and to show them strategies to begin their interpretation, such as:

- Comparison across cultures
- Understanding how choices are shaped by available options and strategies
- Locating particular practices in relation to their context (other related practices or attitudes).

Ultimately, description, even description as fun and detailed as Ray’s, is just a first step, however thorough and astute. So, in our comments back to Ray when he shared his description of the Bau Haus, the project team tried to get more information and put forward some possible interpretations; on the radio, we had heard a story about urban dwellers trying to ‘out-source’ pet ownership with dog walkers and pet carers. We wondered if something similar was happening in Korea at the Bau Haus; people without enough space or without the time wanted to have a ‘pet experience’ but not to own a pet. So we asked Ray: ‘Who goes to the dog cafe though? Is it any particular group of people — men/women, age group, groups of kids, single individuals?’

Ray used his observations, however incomplete, to try to come to a number of interpretations; since a lot of the clientele appeared to be young women, some of them teen-agers, and many were repeat customers judging from the fact that the people working at the café knew their names, Ray decided the appeal was most likely the fact that the young women couldn’t have pets of their own (perhaps they lived with their families) and liked interacting with the dogs. Some customers might have been prospective pet owners trying out the experience, giving the dogs a kind of ‘test drive’. Maybe boys went to meet girls who might be attracted by the cute dogs. (See the exercise section at the end of this module for a discussion of some of the cultural context, including recent political events, that might help to interpret Bau Haus.)
In pre-departure sessions, cultural interpretation can be very difficult, so we suggest that facilitators focus on teaching students to see possibilities, to practice generating hypotheses, not get overly concerned with getting a definitive explanations for cultural practices.

Point out that there’s not a single path beneath the water, and that no single dive is likely to give you a picture of the whole.

That’s why multiple interpretations are the best place to start - not just your first attempt.
One of the most important techniques for cultural analysis is to see the context of any practice, attitude or event. That is, to think about what is going on around the practice, how it’s linked to other ideas, assumptions or customs.

The interpretive process should encourage students to see the broader context, including the vested interests of participants, members of society who dissent or abstain from a practice, or the other institutions that have to be in place for a practice to make sense.

Cultural relativism, in part, requires recognizing that, when a practice happens in another country or a member of a different society holds a particular view, these phenomena cannot be understood in isolation, nor is the relevant context for understanding the phenomenon one’s own society. Considering culture relatively means taking into account the broader picture. No cultural fact exists in isolation.

In the instructor’s manual, we talk about the fact that many students observe differences in cycling practices in Europe: the way people get around on pushbikes, the absence of mandatory helmet laws, and the like. But the point is that these practices exist in relationship to a lot of other cultural differences, including differences in urban geography, distances traveled, motorist behaviour. You couldn’t simply transplant one cultural practice to another place!
Sarah S., bound for a student exchange program in Japan, spent time in Okinawa working at a beach-front resort. At the resort, she discovered that beach culture was far from universal. She could only understand local practices when she took account of the broader context:

If you would like to use this example, read the story from the instructor's guide. We have not provided this story in the students' resources, but you can also distribute a copy from your guide, or simply read or have a student read the example out loud (pages 16-17).

The key point here is that practices that seemed shocking to Sarah actually made sense once the broader cultural and social fabric was clear.
One way to persuade students of the necessity of verification is to reverse the perspective, to look at how they might be misjudged if someone jumped to a hasty interpretation of Australian culture.

For this exercise, we’ve provided the reading in the student resources, an excerpt titled, ‘The 51st State: An American in Sydney.’ See the instructor’s guide, Exercise Three, pages 39-41 for instructions, reflection questions, and the passage.

As a reminder, here are the reflection questions:

- How might a fundamentalist religious figure misinterpret practices that are common in Australian popular culture? What other groups might struggle with Australian cultural practices?

- Has anyone in the group been in a situation where their sense of humour was misinterpreted? What other practices do you have that someone might misinterpret?

- For a traveler to Australia, what people, places or things would likely be their first impression of the country? What do students expect would be the most difficult things for a visitor to see, notice or understand if the visitor only came for a week or two to Australia?
‘There is an Indian story -- at least I heard it as an Indian story -- about an Englishman who, having been told that the world rested on a platform which rested on the back of an elephant which rested in turn on the back of a turtle, asked (perhaps he was an ethnographer; it is the way they behave), what did the turtle rest on? Another turtle. And that turtle?

“Ah, Sahib, after that it is turtles all the way down.”’

Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture*

Photo, ‘Breaking News: Turtles all the way down.’

Cultural analysis is seldom a simple matter of uncovering the precise and single cause of a specific practice; as students interpret, verify and explain, they will find themselves linking one cultural practice to another, one idea or symbol to a host of possible interpretations – turtles all the way down (note that this story is also attributed to the philosopher William James). As anthropologist Geertz elsewhere warns, “Cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete. And, worse than that, the more deeply it goes the less complete it is” (1973: 29).

The more threads in a fabric you are aware of, the more connections you can see.

When we train students to use the DIVE method to work toward cultural explanation, we should assure them that the best explanations are open because culture itself is open and adaptable. They might find it difficult to decide which part of the web of significance and practice is the cause and which the effect because all parts of the web can become mutually reinforcing over time.

Our interpretations are contestable or subject to dispute because members of a culture themselves can disagree about what an institution, symbol or custom means, or change their opinions over time (like the South Koreans about eating dogs). What might be scandalous to one generation can become unremarkable in the next (think about the changes in beachwear in Australia); an event that seemed to be a one-off can transform into a recurring part of the calendar; and people can reinvigorate traditions or ideas that seemed to be on the way out.
So how do we think about cultural difference?

As a way of helping students to prepare for the axes of cultural differences and some things that may strike them when abroad, we suggest using the descriptive vocabulary of intercultural training.

We hesitate, only because it can be too easy for students to start thinking that these descriptions are hardened categories into which whole cultures can be bundled. Such a pattern over-generalises and ignores countervailing trends within every group. For example, societies may be individualist about certain issues, but less so about others. For example, Americans can be fiercely independent individualists in some ways, but also strongly loyal to groups that are meaningless to Australians (e.g., deep alumni loyalties to their undergraduate universities). Similarly, some societies that are strongly progressive or technologically advanced (Japan, Taiwan, Sweden, Germany) can also hold fiercely to certain traditions. Labeling any society with a single term is liable to cover over important characteristics.

For this reason, we provide a brief account of some of these concepts for the instructor or facilitator, in order to help students find a descriptive language to talk about and explain some of the cultural differences that they encounter. We advocate teaching them as ways to think about and describe the differences that students will encounter, but highlight how no descriptor captures an entire way of life, nor is any likely to be true in every situation.
The contrast between ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ cultures is one of the most often used but most criticised in anthropology because it can easily suggest that some societies are more ‘advanced’ than others, or that, given enough time, one society will turn into another or ‘progress’ to such a point that a group becomes like Australians. Few theoretical distinctions have been as prone to ethnocentrism as the comparison of ‘modern’ and ‘traditional.’

When people in different places use the term ‘modern,’ they can mean quite distinct things. For example, in some societies, ‘modernity’ is a move towards secularism; in others, it is religious revitalisation and the purifying of the faith by removing inconsistent elements. The members of the Chinese Communist Party, free market advocates in the United States, and European socialist and social democratic groups in Scandinavia and elsewhere have very different ideas about what is ‘modern.’ Anthropologists talk about ‘multiple modernities,’ because what people think is ‘modern’ can be quite different in many places.

Likewise, what some societies consider ‘traditional’ can actually be subject to change and quite recent innovation. Researchers who dig into the history of supposedly ‘traditional’ practices sometimes find they are much less ancient than proponents suggested. (The example of Scottish Highland kilts is one classic example of a relatively recent ‘traditional’ innovation.) Often, the claim that a practice is ‘traditional’ is an attempt to cut off controversy or claim greater legitimacy than was generally accepted. Ultimately, the only cultures or languages that don’t change are dead cultures and languages (and even these might be subject to editing and revision). The pace of change can vary, and some changes are more convulsive than others, but ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ often turn out to be harder to distinguish the deeper we dive.

If students are using a language of ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ a lot, if possible, shift the discussion to try to get them to see that what is ‘traditional’ or ‘modern’ depends on one’s perspective. Something an Australian might see as ‘traditional,’ a local person may just think of as ‘the way we do things.’ Similarly, a practice or bit of material culture may be called ‘traditional’ specifically because it is under threat, whereas an equally old and respected institution may not be considered ‘traditional’ because it is unaffected by change in the same way.

For example, universities are some of the most ‘traditional’ institutions around, preserving systems of degrees, titles, robes, and a host of other bits of culture that date back to medieval European and even Islamic institutions, yet many students will not perceive the universities that they attend as ‘traditional.’ In fact, one of the characteristics of some of the wealthiest and most technologically sophisticated states is that they actually become quite ‘traditional’ in some regards: preservation of historic buildings, spending money on re-enactments and commemorations, construction of museums.

Ask students to check out which parts of life in their host country seem most carefully guarded in terms of traditions and which seem to be changing most quickly.
Anthropologist Edward T. Hall (1977) popularised the concepts of ‘high context’ and ‘low context’ cultures. Hall alleged that in high context cultures, people shared close connections for long periods of time, leading to extensive shared information and understandings; because so much knowledge is shared, communication tends to be sparse, with little explanation needed and few formal processes. Individuals in a ‘low context’ culture may have many more social interactions than in ‘high context’ culture, but these interactions are spread among many people, so little shared knowledge accumulates. In low context situations, more information is explicit, processes are formalised, and rules are clearly articulated.

Luke encountered a ‘low context’ cultural practice while traveling in the UK:

They’re AWFUL at giving directions. Literally every single person we’ve asked has given us a massive spiel detailing every possible route with any additional information they can think of. I’ve never seen a trait so present in every member of any society. And the way they do it is by mentioning landmarks along the way that are just confusing because you don’t know the area anyway. ‘You’ll come up on the fish and chip shop, keep going past that until you get to the paper shop and turn right, then look out for the post office on the right etc etc’.

In contrast, one of the project team members spent a year in Rhode Island in the US, where the tightly knit community possessed such a robust ‘high context’ shared culture that they gave directions with references to landmarks that no longer existed (‘Take a left where the Woolworths used to be…’). For an outsider without the shared context, the directions were impenetrable.

No clear distinction exists between the two types of cultures, and few groups are always either ‘high’ or ‘low’; most societies have situations in which shared knowledge is assumed and others where new people need to be incorporated, procedures clearly described, and it’s safer to spell things out. Students may learn how hard it is to penetrate a ‘high context’ group because so much needs to be learned, but also because group members are sometimes unable to articulate or make explicit what they all know implicitly.

‘High context’ settings tend to be characterised by ‘inside jokes,’ unwritten rules, subtle communication, and long-term residency. Social change and members entering and exiting a group can lead to a ‘low context’ culture, so members get better at explaining and integrating new entrants.

Going on exchange overseas may remove students from a circle of friends who were ‘high context.’ He or she may have to develop more numerous, less intimate relationships, and become more flexible when communicating, learning how to articulate things that might be taken for granted at home. Universities are an environment where, because of international and diverse students, high context situations sometimes have to be opened up to people without that context, such as an understanding of how universities work, the unwritten rules of academic standards (including ethics) and a host of other issues.
Dutch psychologist and anthropologist Geert Hofstede (1980), starting when he was head of research for IBM, has sought to create a classificatory framework to analyze cultural diversity along six axes in a ‘cultural dimensions theory.’ His approach was very practical, such as understanding how management style had to vary in companies across a diverse, international workforce. Five of his six axes were:

- **power-distance** (the degree to which people expected equality or inequality and the degree of hierarchy),
- **collectivism-individualism**, (that is, whether people see their identity as primarily individual and make choices autonomously, or consider their group membership more),
- **uncertainty avoidance** (or their tolerance of risk),
- **masculinity-femininity** (an axis that some users of Hofstede’s system redesignate ‘quantity’ or ‘quality’ of life),
- **temporal orientation** (whether a group tends to plan well in advance or tends to focus on maintenance of traditions), and
Some key terms

- Indulgence & restraint
- Analytic & holistic thinking
- Polychronic & monochronic
- Independent & interdependent self
- Monocultural & multicultural

Strategies

The last of Dutch psychologist and anthropologist Geert Hofstede's axes was:

- **Indulgence or restraint**, especially if hedonistic impulses. Hofstede thought some societies were more hedonistic and others more stoic.

We've added a few other common contrasts that are used to describe cultural differences:

- **Analytic & holistic thinking** (the cognitive habits of a group; do they tend to try to break down problems, focus on the issues they see as central or think more holistically in patterns),
- **Polychronic & monochronic** (does a group adhere to a single, uniform calendar and clock or do they actually abide by a range of different cycles or timelines depending upon a task),
- **Independent & interdependent self** (do they see themselves as having a single identity or do they have an identity or role that shifts more dramatically depending upon context), and
- **Monocultural & multicultural** (some societies are quite uniform, others either have long consisted of groups who have had independent lifeways, or they have recently become more multicultural through immigration or other mixing processes).

The bottom line is that, if the discussion facilitator alerts students to this complexity, that groups can be one trait in one respect, and its ‘opposite’ in others, he or she may find that the students are quick to bring up exceptions, especially in re-entry activities.

Exceptions to expected patterns tend to stand out, so students will often be able to recall them quite vividly once the discussion turns in the direction of acknowledging these types of complexities and the way in which sojourning in another culture can undermine a simplistic self understanding. **That is, cross-cultural experience can often lead to a reassessment and more nuanced understanding of one’s own culture, including lacunae or blind spots in cultural self-awareness.**
What’s the most important resource: curiosity!

The key is to encourage cultural curiosity, to discourage an over-emphasis on judgment, and to advocate adaptability as pragmatic, not moral, change. As Bhawuk and Brislin (1992: 416) write: ‘To be effective in another culture, people must be interested in other cultures, be sensitive enough to notice cultural differences, and then also be willing to modify their behavior as an indication of respect for the people of other cultures.’ In our experience both as educators and living in other cultures, curiosity is half the battle when it comes to having a positive attitude about cultural difference. As cultural analysis grows more sophisticated, students are liable to find that their analyses grow more ambivalent, nuanced, and balanced as they start to see the various effects of different practices, but also how each one occurs in a particular context.
Thank you & have a great trip!
Cultural relativism & analysis
pre-departure workshop

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The BLTH Students at all three institutions.

For more information: ozstudentsabroad.com or http://www.tlc.murdoch.edu.au/project/btlh/
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