

Seminar : *An Introduction to Intercultural Communication for Doctoral Students: Developing Key Problem-Solving Skills for the International Workplace*
Trainer: **Alexia Petersen, M.A.**

This 2-day practice- and applications-oriented workshop is designed to enable doctoral students to develop key skills in accurately identifying and dealing with typical scenarios in cross-cultural academic work interaction. It is open to and highly recommended for both German and international Ph.D students from all faculties and academic disciplines.

The increasingly multicultural demographics in the academic and scientific workplace mean that students are faced with not only having to be more interculturally skilled and proactive themselves when interacting in teams with other students, or with supervisors and professors, who can approach work and supervision in unexpectedly different ways. But especially Ph.D students are increasingly moving towards leadership responsibilities, not the least important of which is to be the critical intermediary at the communication interface between professors and younger students. Drawing on authentic complex case studies and scenarios, this workshop provides a balance of conceptual frame-working and structure to create step-by-step diagnostic tools to define culture-appropriate strategies for typical cross-cultural work scenarios.

For example:

- How can *Sachlichkeit* (factualness), *Klarheit* (clarity), *Verbindlichkeit* (bindingness), *Direktheit* (directness) and *Durchsetzungsvermögen* (individual assertiveness) be a sign of competence and professionalism in one kind of culture, while pose a tremendous risk to be avoided at all costs?
- How do you identify these risks , and how do you deal with them?
- How can a student better identify where his/her scientific competence may be inaccurately evaluated by professors and peers due to his/her culture-specific communication behaviour?
- How do you differentiate between personality issues and cultural patterns of behaviour in discussion style, approach to problem-solving, task comprehension and completion, question formulation, and teamwork?
- How do different cultural values create diametrically opposite approaches to problem-solving? How can a student adjust to these different expectations?
- How does culture shape different leadership and supervision style?
- If a supervisor does not recognise culture-based problems in the institute or team unit, what can the doctoral student do to mediate, and how? Where are the limits?
- What are the hidden conflicts in “international English”, for example, when “German-English” dialogues with “English-English” and “Chinese-English”, even if everyone speaks „perfect“ English?
- How can a student of science, foreign or local, learn a set of concrete intercultural communication skills in a culture non-specific approach, for long-term sustainability?

Workshop Agenda

Day 1

Start of morning session: 9:00 h

I. Introduction

- Aims and approaches
- A working definition of “culture”
- Posing a few key questions
- Diagnostic task

Break 10.30 h – 10.45 h

II. Introducing the cultural “playing field”

- The Low and High Context Communication Paradigms: A cultural values-based approach to identifying and assessing cross-cultural conflict (conceptual foundation)
- The “Cultural Onion”: A model for “mapping” cross-cultural conflict interfaces (structural tool)
- The 4-step Cultural Paradigm Shift Model (strategy building)
- Key example: Different cultural approaches to problem-solving
 - Discussion style: Confrontation vs. Circumvention
 - Giving critical feedback: How to remove the risk to “Face” in frontal discussions
 - How to facilitate information flow through different hierarchical work structures

Lunch break 12.30 h – 13.30 h

III. Case Studies: Reassessing and “Mapping” Cross-Cultural Conflict Interfaces

- Case study 1: Conflicts in teamwork, leadership style
 - Different cultural expectations of leadership and supervision
 - Different cultural meanings of deadlines
 - The basic dichotomy: silence vs. talk
 - Key Learning Points?

Coffee break 15.45 h – 16.00 h

- Case study 2: From diagnosis to prognosis
 - Variations of the basic diagnostic structure
 - Creating a balanced Fact + Face Solution
 - Differentiating between corrective and prescriptive solutions

IV. Wrap-up and outlook

- The role of language: How is language used to create “Face”

17.30 h End of session

Day 2

Start of morning session: 9:00 h

I. In plenary consolidation

- Warmer activity: The Key Learning Points of Day 1?
 - Creating your own toolsheet
 - Loose ends and other applications

Coffee break 10.45 h – 11.00 h

II. “International English”: the Hidden Conflicts in Cross-cultural Dialogue

- “High context” vs. “low context” communication styles
- Characteristics of low context “German-English”
- Typical conflict interfaces in “international English”
 - Giving instructions
 - Saying “no”, interpreting “yes”, and checking comprehension
 - Fixing and re-negotiating deadlines in “rubber time” cultures
- Activity: How to use language to create “face”

Lunch Break 12.30 h – 13.30 h

III. “English-English”: Using language to create Face + Fact solutions

- Practice: Assessing and responding to tricky emails

Coffee break 15.30 h – 15.45 h

IV. Activity: Role-playing simulation for inter-group communication between mono-cultural teams

This is a simulation game that uses “synthetic cultures” as scripts for the role-player. The aim of this role-play is not to practise negotiation technique per se, but rather to examine the dynamics and conflicts that mimic those in real cross-cultural settings. The act of trying to play by different cultural rules enables the player to put himself into the proverbial “other shoe”, and gain a sensitivity for the motivations and logic behind very different communication behaviour. Synthetic role-playing therefore is an effective analytical tool in facilitating the development of cross-cultural business communication skills. The concluding feedback and discussion session consolidates key concepts and learning points.

V. Wrap-up of the day

End of seminar 18.00 h

About the trainer



Alexia Petersen holds degrees from the University of Toronto (B.A) and Queen's University, Kingston, Canada (M.A). An international trainer and consultant in the field of intercultural communication, her unique training approach combines solid conceptual foundations and solutions-focussed applications and has proven to be highly successful and popular with diverse target groups in companies, non-profit and government organisations, and academic and cultural institutions. Both her teaching skills and background and experience, which encompass three very culturally different regions, combine to make her a uniquely qualified instructor.

A native of Toronto, Canada with a multicultural background that also includes Northern Europe and East Asia, she specialises in bringing together the widest spectrum of cultural communication differences and making “challenging” cultures accessible to engineers, scientists, managers, and project leaders from diverse professional fields. In addition to her work with professionals in the business world, she also teaches the next generation of engineers and international managers at RWTH Aachen University and many other universities, graduate schools and research institutions through Germany and abroad. She is also the Principal Academic Lecturer for the Module “Social and Leadership Competence “ and “Study Trip Asia” in the Executive MBA for Technology Managers degree course taught at RWTH Aachen and University of St. Gallen, Switzerland.

Her seminars are regularly featured with a wide range of organisations, such as:

Academic institutions:

RWTH Aachen, St. Gallen, Köln, Duisburg-Essen, MD/PhD program "Molecular Medicine" (Hannover Medical School), DAAD, Max Planck Institute for Biochemistry, International Max Planck Research School for Molecular and Cellular Life Sciences, International Max Planck Research School (University of Göttingen), University of Maastricht (Faculty of Business Administration), Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research - UFZ Leipzig, Graduate School Life Science Munich, Research Academy Leipzig, Konstanz Research School Chemical Biology, ZIBI Graduate School Berlin, Center for Molecular Medicine at the University of Cologne (CMMC), International Max Planck Research School "Primary Metabolism and Plant Growth" Potsdam, Cancer Research Institute, London, UK.

Commercial organisations and companies:

Kuehne + Nagel, Dr. Oetker, Haniel, Kraft Foods Germany, Cinram, CemeCon, DVB Bank, LG.Philips Displays, Philips APM /PLDS, Cognis, SONY Germany, Shell Chemicals

Others:

Government of Ontario, Toronto, Canada; Goethe-Institut (Amsterdam, Toronto, Vancouver), missio (Aachen), Deutsche Telekom Foundation

As guest speaker:

M.I.T, University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University (Vancouver), Wharton Business School (University of Pennsylvania), Imperial College of London

As author:

Alexia Petersen has contributed featured articles on the topic of intercultural communication to magazines, such as Personal.Manager HR International - the German-language trade journal on international personnel management; BusinessForum China – the journal of the German Chambers of Industry and Commerce in China; partners - Italy & Canada – the journal of the Italian Chamber of Commerce of Toronto.