

# **Learning through Cultural Metaphors: Approach and Application in a Leading Across Cultures Course**

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Leading Across Cultures is an MBA elective and a required course for those majoring in international business at the University of Baltimore. The course focuses on the essential criteria for global leadership success: the technical skills required to lead geographically dispersed operations within complex networks; and the human skills required to inspire, motivate and succeed at the helm of a multicultural organization. It is interesting to note that while international students account for less than 25% of the MBA population, the Leading across Cultures course attracts a higher proportion of foreign students. This enriches the cultural metaphors discussion as described below.

The multicultural leadership module extends over an eight week period. Early sessions focus on the study of cultural dimensions frameworks as a means of shaping the students' general understanding of similarities and differences among national cultures. This etic approach is useful for providing broad, cross-cultural comparisons of value systems, attitudes and behaviors among cultures. As the module progresses, students learn that these dimensional frameworks do not capture the more complex aspects of national culture that are time and context sensitive, nor do they provide insights into fundamental determinants of culture, such as how each national culture is shaped by its history, socioeconomic conditions and international relationships. This discovery motivates students to consider more comprehensive approaches to understanding the uniqueness of each national culture. It is in this context that a course session is devoted to cultural metaphors of national identity. Cultural metaphors, based on Gannon's (1994, 2001, 2004, 2008, 2010) seminal work in the field, offer a balanced approach that encourages students to probe more deeply into a society's culture, while anchoring national characteristics within dimensional frameworks where possible. Perhaps the most significant contribution of the metaphoric approach is that it enables students to analyze observable behaviors through a multidimensional lens, not relying on any single dimension of culture as the sole predictor. The following definition of the cultural metaphor is used to introduce students to this approach:

A cultural metaphor is a national institution, phenomenon, or activity that members of the culture consider of high importance and with which they identify closely (Gannon & Audia, 2000, p. 91).

According to Gannon (2004), a cultural metaphor must fulfill the following requirements:

- 1) Capture in a single image the cultural mindset of a nation;
- 2) Provide a framework that incorporates relevant cultural dimensions previously identified for the country; and
- 3) Move beyond the dimensional approach to capture the values, attitudes and behaviors of the culture otherwise ignored.

A proven way to engage students in exploration of cultural metaphors is to begin with the comparison of U.S. football and what the rest of the world refers to as football, or what we in the U.S. call 'soccer.' Given the rich variety of cultural backgrounds represented in the course, this analysis sparks a lively discussion, beginning with a comparison of the rules of play, and then expanding to consider what these rules reveal about the national cultures of the major players. Next, we explore other national metaphors, such as the Italian opera, the German symphony, French wine, the Japanese garden, and the Nigerian marketplace. Limitations of the metaphoric method are outlined in this context. Gannon (2004: xiv) notes that cultural metaphors may be criticized as a form of stereotyping and cautions that a cultural metaphor is best used as an entry point for understanding and for making probabilistic statements about individuals within a group. The Leading across Cultures stresses this point, and suggests that both dimensional frameworks and metaphors should be utilized in this manner.

The professor then asks students to discuss what each national metaphor reveals about the general cultural characteristics of each of the sampled countries. For example, how different is Italian culture from German culture? How do the characteristics of French wine and the German symphony lead one to discover some of the cultural differences one observes between these two countries?

Following this introduction to cultural metaphors, students move to an in-depth analysis and cross-cultural comparison of the differences between the U.S. and Portugal, as expressed by U.S. football and two symbols of Portuguese national identity: the Portuguese bullfight; and the *fado*, a unique Portuguese folk music form. This is a valuable pairing for this exercise as the two cultures are diametrically opposed on all dimensional frameworks.

Required readings for this session include "American Football," in Gannon's (2010) *Understanding Global Cultures: Metaphorical Journeys through 28 Nations, Clusters of Nations, and Continents*; and Nielsen et al. (2007) "The Cultural Metaphor Revisited: Exploring Dimensions, Complexities and Paradoxes through the Portuguese Fado" published in *the International Journal of Cross-Cultural Management*. Recommended readings include the "Portuguese Bullfight," also in Gannon's (2010) *Understanding Global Cultures*, as well as a marvelous account of Portugal's historic global leadership described in *The First Global Village* (Page 2002), and its contemporary role detailed in *Portugal: A European Story* (de Vasconcelos & Seabra, 2000). These readings would not be complete without an example of Portuguese literary genius as expressed by Saramago (1990), a Nobel Laureate in literature, in his *Journey to Portugal: In Pursuit of Portugal's History and*

*Culture*. Other significant sources of information include the 2007 movie *Fados* directed by Carlos Saura, <http://movies.nytimes.com/2009/03/06/movies/06fado.html>, as reviewed by the New York Times: and the National Geographic's website:

[http://worldmusic.nationalgeographic.com/view/page.basic/genre/content.genre/fado\\_717/en\\_US](http://worldmusic.nationalgeographic.com/view/page.basic/genre/content.genre/fado_717/en_US)

Applying the cultural metaphors method we move away from a static perspective on national cultures, enabling us to view changes over time and to recognize coexisting intracultural variations. It is interesting to note that the *fado* metaphor reveals paradoxes embedded in the culture, encouraging students to realize that cultures are not always easy to pin point on a dimensional scale. Students come to the realization that cultures are dynamic, influenced by socioeconomic and political forces. The presence of opposing values and attitudes may be particularly evident in countries that have experienced political upheavals and economic struggles. In the Portuguese case, the paradoxes are as follows: Fatalism *and* Perseverance; Large Power Distance *and* Equality; Uncertainty Avoidance *and* Risk-Taking; Group Orientation *and* Isolation, as well as Private *and* Shared Space.

Based on this foundation, students are asked to think about how they would compare the U.S. national culture to that of the Portuguese. The starting point is the presentation of the two tables below for which students are challenged to answer the following questions:

1. What are the major similarities between the two cultures?
2. What are the major differences?
3. How can we increase cross-cultural understanding between people in the two countries by understanding our similarities and differences?
4. How is this information useful to business leaders who are challenged to inspire and motivate a multicultural workforce with both U.S. and Portuguese members?

Table 1.  
Cultural Dimensions Revealed Through Fado & Football

Research Framework	Portugal's Value System Revealed through traditional frameworks	U.S. Value System Revealed through traditional frameworks
Hall and Hall (1990)	High Context Polychronic	? ?
Hofstede (1980)	Human Relationships over Task Achievement	?
Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961)	People Capable of Good & Evil Hierarchical Controlling Time Orientation Honoring Tradition	? ? ? ?

Table 2.  
Cultural Paradoxes and Complexities

Compare	Portuguese Paradoxes & Complexities	U.S. Paradoxes & Complexities
National Paradoxes	Equality and Large Power Distance	?
	Uncertainty Avoidance and Risk-Taking	?
	Group Orientation and Isolation	?
	Perseverance and Fatalism	?
	Private and Shared Space	?
Values	Accommodation	?
Providing	Catharsis	?
Nuance	Style	?

This framework always sparks enthusiastic discussion, enhancing each student's self-awareness of his or her own cultural roots and deepens cross-cultural understanding. This discussion session has been offered in both face-to-face courses and online. It is equally effective in both settings.

### **Lessons Learned Through the Cultural Metaphors Session**

The following discussion wrap-up captures the essence of the primary lessons learned in the cultural metaphors session, a component of a recent online offering of the Leading across Cultures course. Sample student comments provide evidence of the educational impact of this session.

*Student 1* concluded

...Cross-cultural managers and leaders working in both the U.S. and Portugal can utilize this information to come to a deeper understanding as to what motivates their business partners and how best to forge effective business and personal ties with them. Without a thorough knowledge of the cultural dynamics of each country, there is risk of inadvertently offending a business partner or ending a business relationship due to an unintended social faux pas...

The professor agreed and reminded students that insisting that employees cater to the American management style in the U.S. is not the best way to achieve an organization's goals. However, the point is made that the manager should not always adapt to local conditions. If the manager has a "geocentric" perspective, he or she will search for the best approaches, the best motivational techniques, the best strategies and solutions independent of where these ideas originate. *This means that sometimes the international manager will be a "Change Agent," working with employees and managers from other cultures to help them to*

*understand why in this particular case, doing things a new and different way makes sense.*

*Student 2* pointed out that not all European cultures are the same. The professor highlighted this comment because it is such an important point. It is a common mistake to assume that all countries in the same geographic region have the same or similar cultures, which can lead to disastrous results for intercultural relationships and international business results.

*Student 3* talked about her motivation to learn about other cultures. She said,

It is essential to understand the challenges that come with cultural misunderstanding, that way people will know the importance of acquiring knowledge in order to understand other people's culture. The willingness to learn about other cultures must be present in order to overcome cultural barriers. Respect for the other culture is equally important. This will be reciprocal, because if I respect your culture, there are more chances that you will respect mine. It is important to note that one culture is not necessarily better than another culture; instead culture is a result of the social context and fabric of the nation. This way people will appreciate the differences and have more understanding of why things are the way they are.

*Student 4* summarized it this way:

There are rich cultural aspects that most countries are known for and take pride in. If there is no respect to this tradition and way of life, it is difficult to understand why decisions are made or certain stances are taken. I believe it starts in the home of parents taking the time to share with their children the cultural values they believe in. The schools must then take it to a new level by sharing information with students in geography class and world history, the different countries, their history, and also their current events. Keeping young minds engaged and aware of the world around them allows for a greater feeling of respect to be felt by our world neighbors. Finally, businesses should celebrate the diversity in their work environments by one, making their workplace diverse and two, respecting and encouraging conversations of diversity on all levels. This sets the stage for countries to allow for foreign exchange programs and holiday celebrations to take place around the world so that cultures can interact and learn from each other.

*Student 5* highlighted the importance of broadening one's perspective and opening one's mind:

One of the largest obstacles to overcome when trying to increase cross-cultural understanding is to have an open mind and interest in exploring new and different things. Once this door is opened, the actual understanding of each other's cultures can begin.

The professor added that this desire to find common ground is an important determinant of successful cross-cultural interactions. We can more easily accept and understand differences in values, attitudes, and behaviors if we can understand what it was in the person's history that led to his or her perspective. The professor concluded the session with a light-hearted story of an incident that took place during the *International Journal of Cross-Cultural Management's* review process for her 2007 "The Cultural Metaphor Revisited" article. This story highlights a significant paradox of Portuguese culture that is deeply embedded in the fado: Perseverance and Fatalism; and contrasts it with the U.S. optimistic attitude. The professor began the story as follows:

I have a funny story to share with you that is illustrative of U.S. – Portuguese cultural differences. When our article (now published) was going through the review process, I received a note from the editor that our article had made it through the first cut and was being sent out for a thorough review before the decision to accept or reject would be made. Here is my e-mail answer to the editor, revealing the optimistic U.S. attitude:

*This is wonderful news. If we are fortunate to receive a positive outcome from your review process, we will be prepared to make all necessary revisions on a timely basis to meet your requirements.*

*Thank you for keeping us informed regarding the process.*

*Sincerely,*

*Christine Nielsen*

*Professor of International Business and Strategy*

I had copied both my co-authors on the e-mail so they would see that we were entering the next phase. Co-author, Professor Machado wrote the following reply the next day:

*Doesn't look that good to me. But that is perhaps just my pessimism at work!*

...Followed shortly by my other co-author, Prof. Soares, who wrote:

*Great news! Don't be pessimistic, Carlos. I'm sure our paper will be selected: Please say that 3 times every morning (like you really mean it ;-)*

The funny part of the story is that neither realized that they were also copying the editor of this special issue editor, a Hungarian. I guess he must have had a sense of humor, because eventually the manuscript was accepted for publication!

## References

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