



# Worldview:

T H E W I S D O M O F

## Cultural Sensitivity

Name tags. Have you ever stopped to consider the badge that adorns your uniform jacket—and the uniforms of practically everyone else who works at your ski area? Nearly ubiquitous at American resorts, they list the wearer's name and usually his or her home town. Now reflect on just how many of those tags—possibly including your own—list a foreign city and country on that second line.

If you gathered all the foreign-born employees at your area you'd likely have the makings of a small global village. Maybe you'd spot Paulina from Gdansk, Ernesto from Lima, and Adrian from Melbourne. Perhaps you'd recognize Philippe from Lyon, Noriko from Tokyo, and Ivana from Prague. What if your students wore similar name tags? The span of international representation would certainly expand to include guests from Mexico, Argentina, Japan, India, Scotland, Korea, Germany, etc. etc. (See the sidebar titled "Global Glance," page 60).

An increase in multicultural populations at snowsports resorts mirrors national trends of changing demographics in the United States. Beyond adding nuance to the American resort scene, international visitors and seasonal help from foreign lands create a need for enhanced cultural awareness on the part of all resort employees, especially instructors.

Upon arriving at lineup, instructors often discover that in their assigned class are several ski students from non-U.S. locations—some of whom speak limited English. A multicultural class is sometimes frustrating, and often it is difficult to create a learning environment conducive to guests from different countries, each with varying interests and motivations. One question you may be asking yourself in the coming season is, *How can I bridge language and cultural differences to convey all elements of a quality lesson and ensure guest satisfaction?*

As a part-time ski instructor at Colorado's Eldora Mountain Resort, I gain a lot of satisfaction from teaching an interna-

tional clientele. It doesn't hurt that I bring to this teaching environment experiences gained as managing director of Real World Solutions, a Colorado-based company that provides intercultural competence and organizational performance training and coaching. But you don't need a degree in international or communication studies to teach effective lessons for foreign guests. Mostly you just require cultural sensitivity based on a little knowledge of other cultures, and a willingness to modify your communication style.

### FOREIGN INFLUX

Various reasons are offered as to why ski resorts in the United States are becoming more "global" in terms of attracting a multicultural work force and increased international visitation. First, it is often very difficult to find enough U.S.-based seasonal employees for resorts, hotels, and ski/riding schools, so many resorts actively recruit in other countries to cover staff and instructor needs and to add language capability as a service for guests. Second, the sinking value of the dollar (which, in 2007, declined to a 26-year low against the British pound), made skiing, snowboarding, and visiting national parks in the United States much more financially attractive to international visitors.

Of course, snow conditions also matter, and both the casual and die-hard skier and rider will flock to ski locations that offer good snow, wide ski/snowboarding runs, and an overall

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enjoyable experience. While some areas of the United States—most notably parts of the East—suffered from dismal snowpack throughout much of 2006–07, the country as a whole enjoyed a relatively good snow year. Europeans, in particular, gravitated toward the United States when winter failed to blanket their homeland slopes with plentiful snow.

Upticks in foreign visits certainly represent one aspect of the growing “globalization” at American resorts. Another major influence is the growing diversity within the nation’s resident population. Some studies project that white Americans—which currently form the majority population group in the United States—will be in the minority by 2050 due to rapid growth in the nation’s Hispanic and Asian populations. Hispanic Americans, currently the largest minority group in the United States, are the fastest growing group and, according to the Selig Center for Economic Growth, have an economic power estimated to reach just over \$863 billion in 2007.

### PREPARATION IS KEY

The reality of ski instruction today is that multiple nationalities may be represented in any given class—with countries of origin ranging from the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia, Argentina, and Japan to India, South Korea, Mexico, and others. Many visitors come from overseas, but quite a few live and work in the United States. This prompts many of the larger resorts to actively recruit instructors who speak languages other than English in order to provide the added benefit of language capability for private lessons with international visitors (although the service is never guaranteed, especially at peak times).

Of particular relevance is the fact that getting any of these temporary foreign workers to the United States on H-2B visas can be problematic due to limited availability and processing delays. It is not unusual for much-needed foreign workers to be delayed due to visa issues, and arrive after peak Christmas business. Note: Annual issuance is limited to 66,000 H-2B visas (33,000 each six months). Renewal is possible and not included in the count if the individual worked for the same employer within the last three years.

With the increased number of ski visitors from other countries and the changing demographics in the United States, PSIA members will routinely face intercultural communication situations and challenges in their daily lives as well as in ski classes. These realities are driving a different way of marketing and raising cultural awareness in snowsports instruction. Clearly, it’s important to be prepared for this reality. In so doing, we stand to learn even more about our own culture and ourselves.

### THINK COLD, THINK ICEBERG

We’re all used to the cold and snow (at least part of the year), so think about an “iceberg” model that illustrates the cultural

programming that shapes our identity and worldview (fig. 1). We may not intend to act a certain way—we just do—and this is due in part to values, beliefs, and attitudes ingrained in us by our culture.

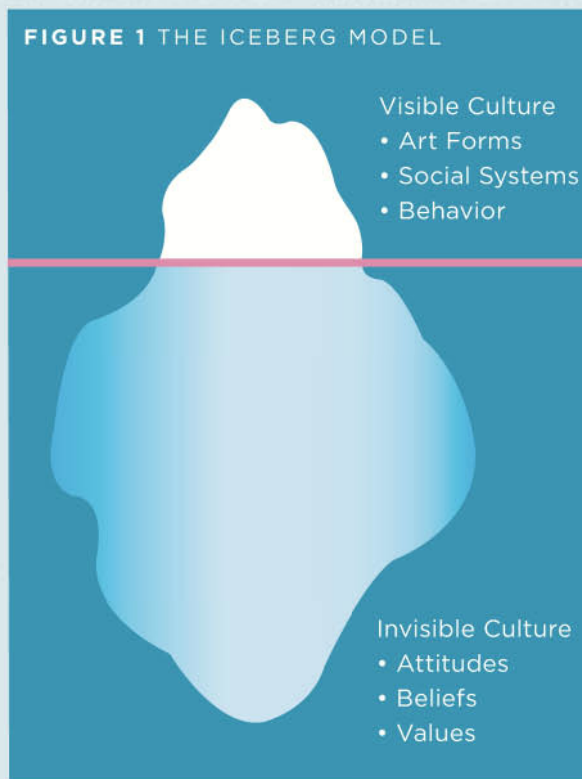
For example, each culture differs in terms of communication style, with a significant point of departure being the extent to which representatives of that culture rely on the words in a conversation rather than the context—that is, the information “around the words” (non-verbal gestures, situation, or environment). Culturally speaking, Americans (and perhaps American ski instructors in particular) want to express everything verbally and technically. Other cultures (notably those of

Japan, Mexico, and India) prefer to communicate less directly in order to “smooth” the relationship and preserve harmony.

Have you ever had a student from Japan, Korea, or India nod enthusiastically after you have explained a certain technique, but then demonstrated through subsequent action that he or she probably didn’t really understand what you said? This expression of apparent agreement is not at all insincere. Rather, it’s a cultural attempt on the part of the student to help you feel good about the interaction.

Given these differences, how can an instructor know when a student truly understands or perhaps needs more help? One suggestion is to give the students time to communicate, as it may take them longer to express the question or issue, or they could be reluctant to share their confusion.

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Sometimes other students in the class can be the “go-betweens” to translate or explain what is going on, thereby “saving face” for the student who is reluctant to tell you directly that he or she has no clue how to, for instance, get on the lift. Sharpening observational skills, paying attention to nonverbal communication, and using the other students as a means to gather and dispense information can greatly “fill in the blanks” for what is not being said.

On the other hand, guests from Australia and some European countries (e.g., Germany and Switzerland) are likely to be even more direct communicators than Americans. This can lead to interchanges that are debate-like and seemingly harsh-sounding, but, actually, this is just their means of analyzing the issue in order to better understand. In this case, don't take anything personally. Recognize this as a potential cultural trait and continue your lesson.

When all else fails and you have the option, try to have another instructor work with those with particular challenges—just as you would with any native, English-speaking student who is having difficulty. While it is important to be culturally sensitive, not all challenges may be culturally linked. The bottom line is that you need to teach to the student you have; your added cultural sensitivity will help, but may not always be the answer.

**STYLE COUNSEL**

Another situation in which cultural differences may crop up has to do with instructional style. An underpinning of PSIA's American Teaching System is that it's very participatory and guest-centric. However, you might find that students from Japan or Mexico appear to be very embarrassed when you point out to their group something they may be doing especially well—or some nuance of performance they need to work on. This is because of the cultural

**GLOBAL GLANCE**

Beyond the empirical evidence you'd gather by just listening for foreign accents around your resort, you can look at figures compiled by the National Ski Areas Association (NSAA) and Colorado-based Leisure Trends Group (LTG) to get a sense of visitation trends among international guests.

While data are not comprehensive of all resorts, NSAA's Kottke National End of Season Survey for 2005-06 indicates a .2 percent overall increase in international visitation from 2004-05 to 2005-06. Indeed, after a significant drop attributed to curtailed travel in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, international visits to snowsports areas have been rebounding since 2002-03. Excluding figures for Canadians, which have held relatively steady at approximately 1.6 percent of overall skier/snowboarder visits in the United States, skiers and riders coming from other international locales accounted for 4.1 percent of overall visits in 2005-06, up from 3.3 percent in 2002-03.

According to NSAA, larger resorts have seen the most increases—and the association's 2006 National Demographic Study reports that most foreign skier visits occurred in the Rocky Mountain region (46.1 percent), followed by the Northeast (27.8 percent), Pacific West (15.1 percent), Midwest (8.3 percent), and the Southeast (2.7 percent).

Leisure Trends Group, another source of demographics within the recreation industry, reports that most visitors to U.S. resorts come from English-speaking countries (i.e., Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia). Spanish-speaking regions (Argentina, Chile, Mexico, and Puerto Rico chief among them) also account for a noteworthy base of foreign visitors, as do Western and Central Europe and Asia.

According to LTG, a significant percentage of visitors to American resorts come from countries in which English is the primary language. The United Kingdom accounts for 45 percent of international visitors, with Australia adding nearly 3 percent. (Canadians make up another block of international visitors, but the study from LTG focused primarily on visitors from outside North America.) Almost 11 percent of international guests hail from Spanish-speaking regions such as Mexico, Puerto Rico, Argentina, and Chile (as well as other South American countries). Europeans (classified in the study as Western and “Other”) contributed 7 percent of the foreign influx of skiers/snowboarders, with Japan and “Other Asia” countries accounting for 6 percent. Listed above are the percentages, by country, for foreign (non-Canadian) visits in 2005.

COUNTRIES OF RESIDENCE FOR INTERNATIONAL VISITORS 2005	
ARGENTINA	1.23%
BENELUX COUNTRIES	1.23%
OTHER SOUTH AMERICA	1.23%
MEXICO	1.65%
CHILE	2.06%
JAPAN	2.88%
FRANCE	2.88%
AUSTRALIA	2.88%
GERMANY	2.88%
OTHER ASIA	3.29%
PUERTO RICO	4.53%
BRAZIL	4.94%
OTHER EUROPE	10.29%
OTHER	12.76%
UNITED KINGDOM	45.27%

SOURCE: LEISURE TRENDS GROUP

predisposition to “blend in” and promote harmony within the group.

This response can be frustrating to an instructor who relies on feedback

and participation as part of the learning process. However, it's wise to work one-on-one with the student who is worthy

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of praise or needs some specific tips. Rather than “single out” these students in front of the group, incorporate the individual learning opportunity within the group experience.

In general, good ski instruction is often good cultural instruction. In “What Makes a Good Progression,” an article in the winter 2006–07 issue of *Instructor to Instructor* (the newsletter for PSIA’s Rocky Mountain Division), author Dan Humphries writes, “While it is important to get and keep [students’] attention, it is equally important to keep the talking to a minimum. Use as few words as you can to describe concepts . . . when confusion arises, have the student explain in his/her terms what he/she did understand. Check for understanding often.”

The article further states, “Remember that much of what we communicate is nonverbal, even when we are speaking. Your body language and facial expres-

sions, and especially your ability to clearly demonstrate the movements you are describing, are crucial to the success of the progression.”

Sticking to the principle of “the less said the better”—and demonstrating when all else fails—is an effective cultural bridge as well as a sound teaching technique.

### ESL CLASS TIPS

When teaching students for whom English is a second language, keep in mind that English is a very difficult language to learn, with thousands of new words created every year (possibly more than in any other language, according to [www.askoxford.com](http://www.askoxford.com)). English grammar has more exceptions than rules, pronunciation is often challenging, and there are a variety of regional dialects within the United States.

Never take someone’s inability to speak fluent English as a measure of

their intelligence—or lack thereof. A guest who speaks halting English in a ski class might very well be a surgeon back home in Spain. Fortunately, most international visitors are capable of speaking basic English. (In contrast, an American skier who travels to France or Austria is likely not conversant in French or German.) That said, there are many useful techniques that assist in dealing with speakers whose second language is English.

#### 1. Simplify speech patterns.

Using simple vocabulary to form brief and uncomplicated sentences will make for instruction that’s easier for your students to follow. Use the active instead of the passive voice (i.e., “Start your turn” versus “Your turn should start now”) and refrain from using colorful modifiers such as “almost always,” “pretty soon,” “for the most part,” and “amazingly simple.”

2. **Modify speaking delivery.** It is important to speak slowly but not too slowly. Enunciate and articulate, allowing the listeners to read your lips. Speak at a normal volume and if you have to repeat a sentence, try a different way of explaining the point instead of speaking louder. (It’s a language issue, not a hearing issue.)

#### 3. Don’t speak “in code.”

Avoid use of abbreviations, technical jargon, idioms, slang, and vague references. Can you imagine what a foreign student would think if you said, “Are you ready to get dialed in on BERP”?

#### 4. Demonstrate or use visuals.

For example, demonstrate specific body movements, use hand signals to illustrate movement of skis, and draw turn shapes in the snow with your pole. Students with limited auditory learning capability (or lack of language), will rely more on visual and kinesthetic learning methodologies. These techniques

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are very helpful with most guests, especially international visitors.

### 5. Clarify frequently and check for understanding.

Review and summarize often. When checking for understanding, encourage questions, repeat what you believe the speaker said in order to ensure that you understand, and provide an answer in several ways. Listen actively and completely before making assumptions and addressing questions. Share responsibility for the interaction. Simply put, do as much as you can to make the communication process clear and effective.

## CULTURAL EXCHANGE

There is a good news/bad news story here. The good news is that PSIA's teaching methodology is guest-centric and customized for individual students.

Most instructors try very hard to “tune in” to all students, and having a guest from another country might prompt them to be even more accommodating than usual as a measure of hospitality.

In addition, our style of “positive reinforcement” is in contrast to other teaching approaches that are more directive and authoritarian. Several of the international visitors I've taught have said they favor the PSIA approach and, when that's combined with excellent skiing conditions, prefer to come back to American resorts. The bad news is that we can end up offending some guests if we appear to be U.S.-centric and culturally insensitive.

Perhaps because the United States is a relatively young and somewhat isolated nation that prides itself on its independence, I've found that its inhabitants can be rather ignorant of global issues and geography. Some Americans may automatically expect others to view the world

and respond to it the way Americans do. Therefore, a key attitudinal change when working with international visitors is to try to understand the individual's particular behavior within the context of his or her culture.

Imagine the iceberg analogy again—with two-thirds of the iceberg (and culture) being “invisible.” This time, however, imagine two icebergs colliding. By the time the “visible” behavior conflicts, the more expansive invisible culture has long ago clashed, reflecting the key cultural value differences. After all, when cultures clash—as you might observe among two people with strikingly different communication behaviors driven by different values—the fallout can run the gamut from confusion to confrontation.

A mental exercise you can go through to develop empathy for cultural differences is to imagine that you've changed your boots from one foot to the other—admittedly an awkward prospect. This kinesthetic analogy can allow you to recognize the discomfort an international student might experience upon facing a language or cultural barrier. To take the analogy a bit further, imagine stepping into the ski boots of someone from Italy or another country to understand his or her reference to the lesson. This is a good visual to help you “think” differently and become more aware of your own culture's “comfortable shoes.”

However helpful it may be to think differently, you'll also make great strides if you learn to think a little more like your student—or at least recognize certain cultural characteristics. Here are some simple suggestions that can help you identify with and relate more fully to your foreign students:

### 1. Learn more about the countries of your international guests,

including basic geography, government, economy, and current issues. While you don't necessarily need to read up on every area of the world,

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you can talk to fellow instructors and ski school supervisors to get a sense of the most common countries of origin for your area's guests. There are many online resources and books on world geography or country-specific guides available (see the resources listed at the end of this article). This provides you with enhanced professionalism and credibility in the eyes of the international visitor.

2. **Share any experience (however limited) you may have had in the country or region of the students.**

This provides a solid basis for strong instructor-student relationships (providing you share appropriate and non-controversial remarks or memories), and shows you take a sincere interest in their culture. On or off the slope, take time to get to know someone from another culture;

learning more about how culture influences how things are done.

3. **Be savvy about gesture differences across cultures** and learn more

about "the silent language" (i.e., the nonverbal communication that is so important to bridging language and culture.) Take, for example, the "okay" sign, with thumb and forefinger touching to form a circle and the three remaining fingers extended. In the 1950s, then Vice President Richard Nixon unwittingly added fuel to widespread hostility toward the United States by flashing the okay sign to a waiting crowd in Brazil. They responded by booing, and the next day local newspapers ran large photographs of Nixon and his gesture. In their culture, Nixon had signaled the gesture equivalent for "you a\_\_-hole." A Frenchman, particularly in the south of France, would read

that very same gesture as meaning "zero" or "worthless." In Japan, the thumb and forefinger making a circle is used as a symbol for money, with the fingers creating the round outline of a coin. Upon signing a contract, an American businessman who flashes "okay" might mistakenly be thought to be seeking a bribe. Perhaps it is best to learn the words for "yes" or "fine" in another language and keep your hands at your side. Insulting gestures (ranging from use of fingers or forearms to an ear waggle and nose thumbing) vary across cultures, with consequences ranging from the embarrassing (political backlash) to serious (outrage and violence).

Recognize that personal space and male-female relationships are also very defined across cultures. In some cultures, touching is frowned

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upon, while other cultures are very touch-oriented (see the sidebar “Touch Screen,” page 68).

The ultimate gesture that is known everywhere, is rarely misunderstood, and can aid in the most difficult situations is the smile, but you also want to refine its use by knowing the different ways and times to use a smile. Some people smile at strange times. In Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines people often mask embarrassment by smiling or even laughing. The Japanese are also noted for smiling when apologetic, confused, or even angry. Asian children new to the United States may hesitate to smile when photographed with Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny because this is considered a serious occasion.

In the Korean culture, excessive smiling signals shallowness or thoughtlessness. And, some people are physically incapable of smiling due to injury to any of the eighty facial muscles that influence the smile. However, even with some cultural variations, the value of a smile sincerely given is priceless.

Individual instructors can do much during the season as well as in the off-season to be better prepared to work with students from other cultures. Just being aware of differences helps, as does learning more about individual cultures. Of premium importance is the ability to be flexible and open, and build effective intercultural communication skills—relying as much on nonverbal skills and the context of the situation as on the spoken word of the student (see “Nordic Adventures in Japan,” page 16).

**CULTURE MATTERS**

Resorts and ski schools provide significant training for specific roles and jobs, but there does not seem to be an established curriculum of cultural sensitivity training. However, the overall focus on guest satisfaction and “going the extra mile” for guests goes a long way toward welcoming visitors (and seasonal employees) from other countries.

Whereas cultural insensitivity can be very costly in terms of ill will, bad PR, and lost business, cultural sensitivity and knowledge are both marketing assets.

As international business opportunities grow, and marketing becomes more globally sophisticated, it’s likely that more attention to this type of training will become a required priority. “First to the party” gains the competitive skiing edge.

For the individual instructor, demonstrating cultural sensitivity lays the groundwork for more business and a favorable impression of Americans as part of the global community. Learning to recognize and appreciate cultural differences may not only help you teach a better lesson, but it will also go a long way toward improving international understanding . . . one instructor and one class at a time. ♦

**RESOURCES**

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**TOUCH SCREEN**

TOUCH	DON'T TOUCH	MIDDLE GROUND
Middle Eastern countries	Japan	France
Latin American countries	United States	China
Italy	Canada	Ireland
Greece	England	India
Spain	Scandinavia	
Portugal	Other Northern European countries	
Some Asian countries	Australia	
Russia		

Source: Roger E. Axtell. 1998. *Gestures—The Dos and Taboos of Body Language Around the World*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.

**HOW DO YOU COMMUNICATE?**

In order to assess your own intercultural communication skills, consider taking the Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory (CCAI). The CCAI is a low-cost and easy-to-use assessment tool—available through many intercultural consultants—that helps you determine your strengths and areas of improvement in the following four key skill sets:

1. **Emotional Resilience (ER)**—the ability to take positive action in an uncertain or ambiguous situation
2. **Openness/Flexibility (O/F)**—the desire and willingness to try different things and develop relationships with others who are different
3. **Perceptual Acuity (PAC)**—the ability to accurately read verbal and nonverbal communication cues
4. **Personal Autonomy (PA)**—self-identity and self-knowledge