

# Tourism and hospitality training for foreign cultures — case studies from Lao PDR

---

## Jodie Kurpershoek

Conservation Officer  
Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service  
Department of Environment and Resource Management  
Yeppoon Road  
Parkhurst, Rockhampton, Queensland 4702  
Australia  
jodie.kurpershoek@derm.qld.gov.au

## Abstract

Tourism is quickly growing in developing countries, often overtaking the host country's ability to effectively manage it in a proactive way. Culturally appropriate education and professional development are desperately needed if these countries are to hold their own in competitive global markets and manage their cultural and environmental resources sustainably. Through a series of case studies set in Lao PDR, this presentation encourages participants to scrutinize different approaches and consider how they would tailor training programs and sessions for participants from different cultures.

## Keywords

barriers, training, teaching, communication, foreign culture, cross-culture, multicultural, Asia, Laos, Lao PDR

This paper is based on two and a half years working as a foreign tourism advisor to the Department of Tourism and Hotel Management (DTH) of the National University of Laos (NUoL). It is about my observations and efforts to achieve better learning outcomes in a cross-cultural situation after I learnt how my assumptions hindered me identifying and developing appropriate and effective training programs. This paper is purposely written in 1st and 2nd person to preserve the clarity and relevance of observations and actions which form the basis for my recommendations. I begin with my background and preparation for the position and then explain the situation of the DTH as it was when I arrived. This sets the scene for examples that demonstrate how understanding and addressing situation constraints influences participants' learning. Finally, I provide practical advice that will help you deliver more effective and appropriate training in cross-cultural situations and developing nations. Practical advice is important to consider when 'connecting communities in a climate of global change' because many communities are in developing nations and in desperate need of appropriate professional development. If they are to effectively and sustainably manage their resources and industries in rapidly changing and competitive global markets many of them need, and will continue to need, assistance from other nations. Although based on my experiences delivering tourism training for university lecturers in Laos, my advice aims to improve any communication process between disparate cultures and situations.

## Background & preparation

I dropped the ecotourism strand of my double degree in Ecotourism and Parks Recreation and Heritage after one year of study because I wanted to work with native plants. After study I worked eighteen months as coordinator of a community seed bank. Despite my community training and engagement experience, I worried that I'd be completely out of my professional depth in my new position. So I spent the few weeks

preceding my departure speed-reading textbooks and journals, and photocopying contents pages and abstracts for future reference. I spoke to my mentor about what I should know, be prepared for and actually do because he'd travelled in Laos and was familiar with the aim of the project — to build the capacity of the DTH staff and help them develop and deliver the country's first tourism degree. I felt relieved when he suggested I work with them to develop a series of locally relevant case studies that complemented the curriculum. Case studies were something I knew how to research, write and use, they clearly supported the project aim, and they could be used more than once. I figured that what the DTH staff and I didn't know about tourism in Laos, we'd find out together.

## **The situation**

On arriving I discovered there was no running water in our building most days. Toilets flushed only if I could scoop enough water from a bin, filled weeks or months earlier, into the toilet. I bought drinking water at a shop. The DTH had a small number of old tourism course books in Thai language and one out-dated PC although unchecked computer viruses made it unreliable. In the classroom, a board and whatever notes the staff wrote, borrowed or photocopied were their only teaching aids. There was little funding so staff used personal money to conduct university business. Some volunteered a year or more before they were eligible to receive the starting wage, equivalent to US\$30/month, and even then payment was often delayed. All four DTH staff taught at other colleges year round to supplement their incomes, and all studied English. On top of this, the three female staff members were expected to attend domestic duties at work as well as at home.

In Laos the social status of teaching, and the networking and development opportunities it provides, make it an attractive job. However many teachers, university lecturers included, have limited training and experience. Schooling is based on rote learning, and many teachers go straight from high school or their degree to teaching. The highest level of study offered is often a 5 year degree with one year foundation study (year 11/12 level) and four years of specialist studies including a group thesis in the fifth year. Further qualifications are often obtained internationally. A degree is the minimum qualification required to teach at university although candidates' skills and knowledge do not always match the level their certificates imply. I met lecturers with degrees in English who struggled to hold a conversation and others could discuss a topic but not write a coherent sentence about it in Lao or English. In some cases concepts and words simply don't translate and in others, language skills are the limiting factor. The DTH staff had degrees in tourism industry management, political science, hotel management, English, international relations and business administration from a number of countries. One had industry experience — less than twelve months working in hotels.

Given this and my lack of Lao, it took over a month for the lecturer with the best English and I to translate the curriculum into English when I arrived. Many courses had no or poorly defined descriptions and most had no outline. The DTH staff had to study, research and write outlines and corresponding lesson plans in the break between semesters with only one to three days training about the course. Sometimes outlines and lesson plans were never written, and even if they were, not always followed. After realising local tourism case studies were well beyond the staff's capacity to develop or deliver I wasn't sure where to begin.

Staff needed and asked for help with nearly everything — degree structure, course outlines and training, teaching advice, English, scholarship applications, letter formats, basic computer skills, and obtaining resources and volunteers. I decided to help build their knowledge, skills and resources any way I could. This meant helping with any task on request, and providing as much theoretical and practical training as they could manage whenever they could spare time. Given the situation constraints, training was not easy as it always increased staff workload. To learn how to work around situation constraints and achieve effective and appropriate learning outcomes I resorted to experimenting. Two examples are given below.

### *Example 1*

I organised for one lecturer to attend ‘Train the trainer - world heritage guide’ training in Luang Prabang. I also attended because I wanted to tutor her afterwards and see how an international organization worked around cultural gaps and constraints. The course aimed to train attendees who could then train World Heritage Area (WHA) tour guides in all the Mekong Basin countries. Post training, attendees were to translate the course notes into their own language, and develop and deliver country-specific training programs.

Six 8+ hour days covered everything from identifying cultural heritage to the principles and processes for nominating, listing and protecting WHAs. Principles and practices of thematic communication and tour guiding were also explained. One session was presented in Lao and translated to English, the rest and all course materials were delivered in English. Participants had to complete a number of worksheets and group assignments, the last of which was developing and delivering a themed, guided tour.

As a native English speaker I found it challenging to process everything. I couldn’t imagine how the DTH lecturer could keep up. Although her English was quite good, she told me she didn’t. After training she understood between 25% and 80% of the course content depending on the topic. It took 2 to 6 hours of one-on-one tutorials, explaining words and concepts and discussing examples, for her to thoroughly understand each 2-3 pages of notes and activities.

### *Example 2*

To help train lecturers in ‘food preparation and service’, I made a basic and amateur training DVD filmed in a foreign-owned restaurant with foreign clientele. I also organised for each lecturer to work a shift at the restaurant. My aim was for all staff to have some restaurant experience so they could use the DVD to better explain ‘food preparation and service’ theory to students.

During their 5 hour shift the DTH staff could do and ask anything they liked except talk salaries. Someone was always at hand to explain things they didn’t understand because all the restaurant staff were Lao. The 15 minute DVD was entirely in Lao language and followed the story of two DTH students who applied for a job and did a trial shift. It showed the main restaurant sections, duties and equipment, and showed good and bad service. Key ideas about service appeared on screen before and after each scene but there were no other theoretical components.

I had many informal discussions with restaurant staff and the lecturers about what they had seen, heard and done. Between them, the lecturers had seen every section of the restaurant, its equipment and how it ran. They’d heard stories about nightmare customers and orders shouted in the kitchen. They’d done everything from taking out the garbage to serving icecream. They’d all learnt something about foreigners’ behaviour, their culinary likes and dislikes, restaurant opening hours and capacity, dining customs, table settings and service, food preparation, cooking and storage. On the occasion we discussed food orders, one lecturer told me what was important to write down, where orders were sent and why doing it quickly and accurately was important. When staff finally saw the DVD they had even more to tell me.

## **Lessons**

Although the examples had very different content and aims they illustrate that to achieve more effective learning outcomes relative to the time and effort invested by participants, the trainer needs to address the situation constraints. By working around as many constraints as possible, training is more equitable and accessible to participants with variable language skills and prior experience. The following sections provide

practical advice to help you identify and understand situation constraints and make your training more effective in cross-cultural situations.

#### *Identify and understand constraints*

- *Assume that you know nothing about the situation until you're in it.* Your ideas about what is needed and what will work are based on your perceptions, expectations and assumptions and coloured by your cultural background. You are unlikely to form an accurate or complete picture.
- *Ask people who 'know' the situation and share your cultural background.* People who have worked in the country and/or organisation for some time and share your cultural background can often answer your questions and provide helpful insights. Ask as many people as you can but be aware they may not know the whole situation.
- *Be respectfully inquisitive about the situation with local people.* Careful conversations and casual observations will often reveal more about the situation constraints and participants' experience than direct questioning. Trust and honesty can take a long time to develop so take special notice of what you see and overhear.
- *Use observations and logic to help fill the gaps.* You are unlikely to be told and shown everything you need to know about the situation, so make the effort to complete the picture by comparing what you have observed with what you have heard.

#### *Develop and deliver appropriate training*

- *Translate it.* Spend whatever budget and time you can afford on translation. If using a translator, make sure you gauge their level of language skills and their topic knowledge before discussing your training package and presentation materials. Talk them through the training plan and materials before delivery and allow them time to process information and ask questions. Do the same if you are translating written notes. At the very least have a bi-lingual dictionary handy throughout training.
- *Say it in simple English.* Even if the explanation is longer, participants understand better if you use simple words with common and obvious meanings. Avoid using jargon and context specific words unless you intend to explain them. Use 'English as a second language' workbooks to understand English skill levels and if you're unsure, use primary school level English.
- *Break it down.* New theories and ideas can be complicated, and usually require understanding of related concepts and foreign values. Think about whether participants have the necessary foundation and how you can break concepts and ideas into separate and smaller parts. Explain the necessary foundation and separate parts piece by piece and then help participants build the theory or idea themselves.
- *Keep it short.* Present information in 5-10minute blocks with a pause between each. If you can't fit the information within this time frame break it down more. If you are using a translator, agree beforehand on how many sentences they can translate without losing key points and use this as a guide. Keep your days as short as possible and break up theory with relevant practical exercises or group discussion as often as possible. Rest at least five minutes once or twice every hour, and provide generous lunch, morning and afternoon tea breaks.
- *Slow it down.* Although it can be difficult to gauge, slow your speech and your pace of delivery. Elongated pauses and asking questions after each idea or slide will help you slow down and give everyone time to assimilate new information. Use participants' reactions and answers to continually assess and adjust the pace. Do not rush to 'fit it in and finish'.
- *Make it locally relevant.* Research and use examples and experiences that are most familiar to participants. Explain new theories and ideas using universal human values, participants' experiences,

and places and people they have seen. When it is necessary to use foreign examples, parallel them with local ones. Make sure you clearly demonstrate how new theories and ideas benefit them and apply to their situation.

- *Make it visual and practical.* Use diagrams, illustrations and photographs to help explain theories and ideas and cut down on words. Practical exercises help participants assimilate new information and help you gauge their level of understanding. Group exercises allow participants to understand by doing and by explaining and/or listening to others in their language. 'Doing' also provides a break from simultaneous listening, translating and assimilating.

## Summary

There is no simple, one-size-fits-all, quick-fix recipe for successful cross-cultural training, as every situation is unique and bridging cultural differences is time consuming and often difficult. Even if there is a common language for communication, we all have our own culture and lifetime of experience which makes it difficult to explain, understand and learn things from a foreign perspective. However we can all take practical steps to identify and address situation constraints and ensure training programs and materials are as easy to understand and as appropriate as possible. This requires us to research and observe the situation and background of participants to better understand their constraints, training needs and learning limitations. Once we have done this we then need to develop and deliver training programs and materials that are as simple, short and familiar to the participants as possible.

*Never underestimate the importance of researching and familiarizing yourself with the situation you have to teach in - your participants live and learn in it.*

*Always remember you are communicating across cultural, linguistic and experiential gaps which place a huge demand on participants' mental agility and concentration.*

## Further reading

Jones, Anna and Xuan Quach, *Intercultural communication For Students in the Faculty of Economics and Commerce*. Melbourne: The University of Melbourne, Teaching and Learning Unit, Faculty of Economics, 2003. [http://tlu.econ.unimelb.edu.au/pdfs/intercul\\_comm.pdf](http://tlu.econ.unimelb.edu.au/pdfs/intercul_comm.pdf) (accessed December 21, 2009).

Keatinge, Diana, Helen Bellchambers, Elizabeth Bujack, Krystyna Cholowski, Jane Conway and Patricia Neal. "Communication: principal barrier to nurse-consumer partnerships." *International Journal of Nursing Practice* Volume 8, Issue 1 (2002): 16-22. <http://hdl.handle.net/1959.13/27307> (accessed December 21, 2009).

Servaes, Jan. "Reflections on the Differences in Asian and European Values and Communication Modes," *Asian Journal of Communication* 10(2) (2000). [http://home.scarlet.be/~tor-3018/servaes\\_singapore.pdf](http://home.scarlet.be/~tor-3018/servaes_singapore.pdf) (accessed December 21, 2009).

For a comprehensive list of cross-cultural communication reference books, visit: [http://mclennan.mbs.edu/classroom/bibliographies/Cross\\_Cultural\\_Communication.pdf](http://mclennan.mbs.edu/classroom/bibliographies/Cross_Cultural_Communication.pdf).