

The power of music and participation as learning tools in China and Vietnam...

On being artful and adaptable in your training

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Unfamiliarity can be your door to new learning for yourself and your learners. My unfamiliarity with Hanoi, Vietnam and Lijiang, China and the learning styles of the local workforce certainly opened new doors for me.

Unfamiliarity with both place and local learning styles challenged me not only to employ innovative learning techniques but also to discover which techniques could be compatible to the culture and at the same time meet the receptivity levels of the learners. My unfamiliarities and a willingness to meet the challenge opened a door to a gold mine of learning opportunities that have enriched the lives of both learners and trainers.

The first pre-opening hotel project: Lijiang, China

Exotic Lijiang, before it was devastated by earthquakes a year ago, was renowned for its historic culture and charming scenic places. It is nestled by formidable mountains and dotted by green forests and blue lakes. With such tourism potential, M. Grand Hotel Co. Ltd., invested on their first hotel project by entering a joint venture agreement with their Chinese partners. Part of the initial plan was to hire a team of expatriate consultants to handle the pre-opening hotel project.

Assessing the situation — The task on top of the list was to train Chinese nationals who had no exposure to a five-star hotel environment and quality service standards. With such a task, the odds that the team had to deal with were daunting:

- The language (only a small fraction of the learners could speak English)...

- Scarcity of learning materials (there was no airport yet at that time and road travel from the city of Kunming could take 6 to 8 hours)...
- A proper training venue...
- Getting used to training with a local translator...
- The prevailing negative reputation attached to hotel workers plus some resistance issues on the idea of being *Westernized* versus maintaining the authenticity of the culture.

The fear of being *Westernized* had the strongest impact on training in terms of looking for a perfect-fit approach that would blend harmoniously with the existing culture. However, our team of trainers soon found out that the odds were actually opportunities to exercise creativity, resourcefulness, cultural adaptability and synergistic relationship with the Chinese nationals.

Scouting the learning scenario — Amidst the rustic splendor of Lijiang, it was interesting to see the proliferation of *karaoke* bars and how they were gaining popularity with the locals in an accelerated pace. This made me guess that the *karaoke* popularity may be attributed to the Chinese love for music; presumably, their predominant learning style could be auditory.

My hunch was further confirmed when our team tried to learn some conversational Mandarin. Since the language was basically tonal, we were compelled to shift to auditory mode (a struggle for a visual learner like me).

With this awareness, I speculated that the language could be a major factor in influencing their learning style. I had also observed that most of them had the habit of singing anywhere they wanted to — hallways, gardens, staircase, etc. It was something acceptable to anybody — they sang everywhere, not necessarily just within the four corners of a *karaoke* bar.

These were observations critical to training; so as a team, we discussed all these factors and the training implications, as well, in our effort to improve further our design and facilitation techniques.

The course itself — I was to handle the general orientation course aimed at providing information about:

- What a hotel was...
- The advantages and disadvantages of a hotel career...
- The history/vision of Grand Lijiang Hotel...
- The products and services of the hotel...
- General rules and regulations and personal grooming.

The course preparation was even more thorough than I thought it would be... I had spent tremendous effort in:

- Outsourcing reliable translators...
- Briefing and coaching the translators...
- Preparing easy-to-understand hand-outs (considering that a majority of the learners had no background about hotel work)...
- Getting the learning materials translated, corrected and revised...
- Fixing a university classroom so it would be *learner-friendly* and suggestive of a *learning-is-fun* environment...
- Conditioning myself that everything would go well despite the unusual scenario of training with local language translation.

Day one: mixed feelings... On the first day of the course, I had mixed feelings of apprehension and excitement thinking about the uniqueness of the learning situation. I decided to have the initial slot from the series of training programs as planned so the outcome would be the basis for the possible re-design of the succeeding programs to be conducted by the other trainers.

My mixed feelings were identical with the general feelings of the learners; except perhaps that the degree of their apprehension may be greater than mine. That was the first battle that I tried to win over, easing out their apprehension by way of establishing rapport and building trust. My informal conversational Mandarin lessons paid off. A few common greetings in Mandarin may sound funny to them but they had initially opened the door for rapport building.

Accelerated learning... Then the learners found out that the course would be a different kind of learning, a revolution in learning — the accelerated learning approach — would win their hearts.

Right at the start, I risked introducing the music from the movie theme *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. Though it sounded new to them, there was a sudden buzz of excitement with my Mandarin-translated question:

“If you were to make a movie using the music, what kind of movie would it be?”

Drawing from their answers, I set the mood of the course by explaining to them the similarity of the course with the movie in terms of the fun, excitement and adventure that awaited them.

The charm of participation in training — My first insight in how to adapt the training came to me through the way the learners responded to my questions. They tended to share their answers with each other rather than to individually volunteer to give their answer to me and the class (as I am used to seeing).

One of the Chinese nationals told me they were used to the *teacher* providing all the answers. Anyhow, the way they responded to my questions did not bother me; I considered it a plus factor for introducing collaborative learning activities.

This realization made me shift gears and swerve away from what was originally planned (luckily, I was blessed with a flexible and dependable translator who, with the briefings that we had, was very much prepared for the unexpected).

I thought that if they felt more comfortable talking among themselves, I might as well use it by way of collaborative learning activities. A *deluge* of such activities could be catastrophic when applied to some learning situations but not with this specific type of learners. They simply loved it! Their hunger for participation was insatiable.

To add more *flavor* to the activities, we maximized the beauty of the place. So the teams, armed with their easel papers, notebooks and marking pens excitedly did their work in the garden of the university.

Team presentations was also a big thing for them... Their faces beamed with pride as they listened to their leaders present their ideas. I knew that some of their ideas could have been lost in the translation but it was immaterial to me; what counted most was the impact of the learning experience to them and how this could change their perception about learning and in the end, how this could positively change their lives.

The charm that was music — Characteristic to the accelerated learning approach was the use of *Baroque* music. This had a major breakthrough in the peacefulness of Lijiang. Bach, Vivaldi, Telemann and the other Baroque composers captured the hearts of the learners! In fact, when I tried to look around for audiocassettes to add on to my tape collection, most of the record shops, ran out of stock — Baroque tapes were selling like hotcakes!

Bringing in their own music... Realizing that music was a major part of their lifestyle, I thought that I might as well maximize it to the fullest. Veering away from the usual *question-and-answer* method for concept recall I got smaller teams to discuss their general learnings, their realizations and their comments. Then I thought about giving them a pleasant surprise! I asked them to make a song out of the points that they had discussed using the tune from any popular Chinese song.

Excitement was written all over their faces! They preferred to work outside the classroom and the garden of the university was suddenly alive with the flurry of team discussion and songs.

Presentation time — The most rewarding moment for the learners as each team proudly sang their *songs* together. It was one of the most touching moments in my life as I witnessed their confidence, their pride, their creativity, their synergy and the remarkable team spirit which naturally emerged out of the team activity and the re-energizing power of music. They could not believe that they could come up with such *masterpieces*.

That moment was important to all of us; we knew that we had transcended cultural diversity in a most meaningful way. I had entered their world using music as the key in my desire to bring harmony into the learning situations. So there was harmony in the learner-trainer relationship; the sense of harmony in the relationship was the same harmony found in the music that they had created.

The second pre-opening hotel project: Hanoi, Vietnam

Hanoi was different! Instead of bull carts and bicycles in Lijiang, we had motorbikes in Hanoi. It had the charm of its own and the tourism potential was rich, as well; hence, M. Grand Hotel Co. Ltd. had its foreign investment in Hanoi.

The China experience had been very helpful for me in designing and conducting core courses with the local workforce in Vietnam. However, I had to provide activities that catered to all learning styles considering that I had a mixture of visual, auditory and kinesthetic learners. By using the *accelerated learning approach*, I again had a team of learners looking forward to meaningful, fun-filled days of revolutionized learning.

Developing and communicating the hotel vision — I led top management's strategic planning workshop aimed at developing the hotel's vision and action plans. A significant part of the action plans called for cascading down the vision to the entire workforce. To provide a template for that plan, I gave a demonstration on how to go about it and provided the managers with the *script* of the whole process. Basically, the *script* consisted of the following topics:

- Objectives of the session...
- Background information about top management's strategic planning...
- Workshop:
 - the hotel vision and its importance
 - clarifying the learners' interpretation of the hotel vision
 - the intra and inter-departmental competition
 - the criteria for selection of winners.

We chose one particular department to be our *guinea pig* and I went on with the session as planned while the managers and team leaders observed the process.

With the favorable response from the learners plus their excitement and the commitment to give their best, we knew that we were on the right track. Right after the demonstration, I carried out a debriefing with top management to discuss the “script” and further details of their plans.

Again, the charm that was music — How did music get into the picture? Again, I observed a love of music (karaoke bars were also very popular in Hanoi) among the Vietnamese. There was also much talk about poetry. Taking this into account, I thought of capitalizing the potential of both poetry and music as effective learning tools.

The team competition... A significant part of the process for communicating the vision was a competition between teams to present their interpretations of the vision to each other and to management. I asked the teams to create a poem about the vision and to then turn the poem into a song by creating their own musical scores or borrowing the melody from any type of music.

We gave enough time for the teams to work on this project. Without our knowing it, a bonding among team members was already emerging as they discussed the vision elements and creatively played with words (in Vietnamese) to compose poetry lines. Using their free time, they worked by themselves outside the training rooms. It was a usual site to see teams working on the project in some parks around Hanoi or in the comfort of their own homes.

The day of the reckoning! We gathered the teams in a big hall of the Sports Center so they could present their songs. The managers were as excited as their teams as they coached them further on how they could effectively make their presentations. It was also interesting to see how the managers helped teams overcome “butterflies in their stomachs.”

After the general manager’s opening remarks, we asked each team to present their songs. We saw guitars and audio cassettes being passed on from one team to the other. The repertoire of melodies ranged from popular Western songs to Vietnamese folk songs but something was common in all of them — the essence of the hotel vision as expressed in the lyrics of the songs was very alive.

The event was amazing! I witnessed renewed energy levels from everybody with their applause, fun, laughter and excitement. For us, all teams were winners! They had epitomized synergy and harmony! The event had ended but the emotionally-charged event, the impact of team spirit, creativity and sense of achievement would always remain with us.

Final note

Music, as people say, has a healing power. It’s true! I had used this powerful medium to heal, to overcome my anxieties in what I had earlier perceived to be a restrictive learning environment. In the same manner, from the learners’ end, music had eased out similar anxieties as they dealt with an unfamiliar approach, new concepts and expatriate trainers.

Our worlds, backgrounds and experiences may have been diverse but through the potency of music, the power of team participation and the courage to defy local *learning traditions* vis a vis the quest for the best alternative, a common bonding had emerged.

This common bonding spoke only one language — the language of the soul which is music. In speaking that common language we were able to transcend cultural barriers, saw the difference and in seeing *THE DIFFERENCE*, I was re-inspired as a trainer to continually attempt to make a difference in the lives of the learners by providing impactful learning experiences. ♦



For 19 years, Gloria Martillano, has worked as a trainer/consultant in challenging environments such as China, Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam and selected countries in the Middle East. She attempts to apply innovative concepts in a variety of cultural settings to make a difference in running supervisory/management, leadership, teambuilding, customer relations, coaching, self management, train the trainers, accelerated learning and strategic planning courses. Her articles about these training applications have appeared in this and other international journals.