Suggested Pre-Departure Activities
There is much you can do before going abroad with the Peace Corps to increase your intercultural competence. The more practice you have moving between cultures, and out of your own comfort zone, the easier it will be to make sense of the culture in your host community – and to communicate in ways that are both appropriate and effective.

Intercultural competence has many aspects and one key is awareness of yourself as a cultural being, of being part of a particular culture with specific values and behaviors shared throughout your cultural group. Sometimes we only become aware of our own values and expectations for “normal” behavior by leaving our home culture. Fortunately, you can increase your experience engaging with other cultures before departing on your Peace Corps experience.

An Experiential Learning Approach
Using the Experiential Learning Cycle as a guide, the below suggestions follow the four stages of the model:

1. Concrete Experience
2. Observation and Reflection
3. Analysis and Generalization
4. Planning and Application

According to the Experiential Learning approach, we learn best when we receive and process new information via multiple methods. Therefore you should ideally select a combination of activities that allow for some experience, some reflection, the learning of new concepts and, finally, putting it all together by trying out what you have learned.

Culture Takes Many Forms
To best prepare for your Peace Corps experience before leaving home, it’s important to remember that there are many types of cultures, beyond national or ethnic cultures. Cultures are defined as groups of people with shared values, beliefs and patterns of behavior. They are often formed around:

- Language
- Religion
- Location (such as metropolitan or regional affiliation)
- Profession
- Education
- Gender
- Age
- Generation
- Politics
- Sexual Orientation
- Common Interests (such as sports, music, hobbies)
• Family
• And, of course, national and ethnic culture groups.

When you think about culture, you may naturally think about “big C” or “formal culture” attributes like fine art, literature, institutions, opera. It’s important to also value and explore “little c” or “informal culture” which is more subjective or mundane. The latter, informal culture, is often what we deal with when seeking intercultural competence. Intercultural competence includes the ability to discover and interpret the values, beliefs and behaviors of another culture --such as notions of modesty, organization of time, gender roles, understanding of disease, courtship rituals and much more.

**Suggested Pre-Departure Activities**

1. **Concrete Experience: EXPOSURE**

You can gain Concrete Experience in a cultural setting other than your own without getting on an airplane. For some of us this is easier than others and may only require stepping outside our door – or engaging with someone in our own home! For others, it will require going to another part of town, or perhaps leaving our immediate community.

Here are suggested activities for experiencing another culture, keeping in mind the many types of culture, as listed above. [Please note that we strongly recommend combining exposure activities with reflection activities, in the next section.]

- Attend a religious service or social event at a religious institution of a faith other than your own.
- Eat a meal at an ethnic restaurant, preferably one run by and frequented by people of a culture other than your own.
- View a foreign/international film at a university, cultural center or theater.
- Read a newspaper, magazine or book in another language or from another culture but in English.
- Attend a concert of a type of music you would not normally seek out (world music, bluegrass, punk, folk, classical).
- Prepare a food dish using at least one ingredient that is foreign to you and that you have never cooked with before, preferably from the cuisine of another culture.
- Visit a nursing/old age home and conduct an activity of your choice (stretching class, singing, arts & crafts, storytelling, geography game, visiting).
- Visit a pre-school or kindergarten and play or read with young children.
- Spend time with a gender group other than your own, such as watching a sports game at a sports bar with a group of men if you are a woman who is not involved in sports. Another example may be attending a book group of all women if you are a male.
- Attend a political rally or other political party planning meeting of a group that you are not involved in.
- Spend a weekend or a few days staying with a family other than your own.
• Meet immigrants/refugees in your community or a nearby one. This could include a one-time meeting or visit to a community center/language school or it could be an ongoing tutoring or volunteering position.

2. Observation and Reflection: REFLECTION

The above Exposure activities should be complemented by some Observation and Reflection. One approach is to spend 10 minutes writing about each bullet point, or about the bullet points you choose to address.

Before the experience

• Reflect on your expectations for the upcoming experience in another culture. What will it be like to be immersed in another culture? What do you anticipate feeling? Doing? Consider what challenges may be involved and what you feel more and less prepared to handle.
• Consider how your culture will be perceived by the people with whom you will interact. What assumptions may be made about you due to your age, gender, skin color and other attributes?
• Think about how you would like to introduce yourself. Consider what makes a newcomer appealing and welcome in your cultural group.
• Reflect on your ability to withhold judgment. It is natural for us to categorize, interpret and evaluate new behaviors that we see. Consider ways to avoid immediate judgment but, rather, to just observe and describe actions that are unusual or new to you.

During the experience

• Capture your “aha” moments of realization about the culture and its values as they happen.
• Observe and take notes on cultural rules and norms as you learn them.
• Pay attention to your reactions to difference and unexpected behaviors. Make note so you can review them later.
• Consider if there is a person who could serve as your “cultural informant.” This would be someone whom you could directly ask about how and why things are done a particular way in their culture (or in the culture that they know very well, even if it’s not their culture of origin).

After the experience

• Reflect on whether you were able to communicate effectively and appropriately. Were there any misunderstandings? What did you notice in terms of body language, gestures and other non-verbal communication?
• Reflect on any moments of awkwardness/discomfort. What caused you to be uncomfortable? How can you adapt to these situations in the future?
• What attitudes were present, both for you and the members of the culture that either helped or obstructed your integration into the group?
• What did you learn by being in a new culture? What did you notice about yourself in a new situation? Are there reactions or behaviors you would like to change in the future?
The following reflection questions can be completed at any time as they draw on past experiences:

- **Cultural Bumps**: Consider an experience you had in another culture (or with someone or a group of another culture) which did not go smoothly. What were the elements that prevented this experience from being successful? Write for 15 minutes about the experience and what caused it. What can you learn from it and how would you arrange for a different outcome in the future?

- **Successful Intercultural Interaction**: Consider an experience you had in another culture (or with someone or a group of another culture) which went smoothly. What were the elements that led to this experience being successful? Write for 15 minutes about the experience and what caused it. What can you take from this experience that would like to bring to future intercultural experiences?

- **In-laws & Neighbors**: Consider another family, not related to you by blood but that you have spent significant time with, and think about how that family differs from yours. What are the rules and behavioral norms in that family? How do they differ from those in your family? How do you learn what the differences are? Do you adjust your behavior when you realize the different expectations?

- **Opposites attract**: Sometimes another culture appears extremely attractive to us. Consider an experience during which a different culture seemed very appealing to you. What drew you to that culture? What was compelling? How was it different from your own culture?

3. **Analysis and Generalization: READING**

Analysis and Generalization are essential for taking in new information. Learning about new frameworks and theoretical approaches can help us to organize new experiences.

**Interesting Ways to Look at Culture** *(to research online or at a library)*

- Definitions of Culture (the iceberg, the onion)
- Cultural Dimensions (e.g. individualism vs. collectivism)
- The Cultural Adjustment Curve
- Communication Styles (direct vs. indirect, high vs. low context)
- The Platinum Rule (from sympathy to empathy)

**Key Authors on Intercultural Topics**

- Geert Hofstede
- Edward T. Hall
- Milton Bennett
- Janet Bennett
- Mitch Hammer
- Stella Ting-Toomey
- R. Michael Paige
- Darla Deardorff
• Bruce LaBrack
• Fons Trompenaars

Recommended Books

• Basic Concepts of Intercultural Communication: Suggested Readings edited by Milton Bennett
• The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence edited by Darla K. Deardorff
• The Silent Language, The Hidden Dimension and Beyond Culture, by Edward T. Hall
• Cross-Cultural Communication: A Visual Approach by Richard D. Lewis

Featured Resources and Essays

• Crossing Cultures: http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/publications/crossingcultures/index.cfm
• Looking at Ourselves and Others: http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/publications/looking/index.cfm
• Culture Matters: http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/publications/culture/
• You may wish to play the Peace Corps Challenge game and reflect on the ways that differences in cultural values can play out during a PCV’s service (a good example of this is the Girls Education challenge): http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/educators/enrichment/peacecorpschallenge/

Books by Peace Corps Authors

The Library of Congress celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Peace Corps with this annotated bibliography of selected books in the Library of Congress collections authored by returned Peace Corps volunteers and a few former staff members. It contains a listing of 284 books published between 1964 and 2011:

http://www.loc.gov/peacecorps/

4. Planning and Application: PUTTING LEARNING INTO PRACTICE

Planning and Application are key ways to finalize the Experiential Learning Cycle. This stage is a chance to take past experiences, reflections and new theories and put them into practice.
We suggest that you consider choosing one or more of these activities and, if you have time, to make an ongoing commitment to a volunteer role before your departure:

- Volunteering as a teacher of English to speakers of other languages at a community center or other organization offering language tutoring to non-native speakers.
- Working with primary or secondary school students in a culturally diverse school (or school with a majority population of a culture different than yours) to read books or do simple intercultural games (see [http://www.thiagi.com/games.html](http://www.thiagi.com/games.html)).
- Visiting with in-laws or another family (not blood relatives) for 4 days or more with an eye to learning their family culture and behaving in culturally appropriate ways. Aim to be a family member and not a guest during your stay.
- Mentoring a youth of a culture other than yours.