

# Talking through things: Enhancing intercultural collaboration through evocative objects

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## Abstract

Service design teams are composed of people from diverse backgrounds and perspectives. To be successful navigating this pluriverse, collaborative teams need to develop mechanisms to embrace and nurture the power of diversity. However, teams often lack specific tools and skills to leverage the strengths of diversity. This workshop session aims to provide participants – and service designers in particular – tools to raise awareness of cultural differences and similarities, and experience first-hand the impact of materiality – in the form of evocative objects – as enhancers of intercultural conversations. We explore how surfacing a variety of mental models *through* objects is possible and effective in intercultural teams. Our goal is to demonstrate how design teams can use this approach to approach a new problem space from different perspectives, benefiting from the power of diversity.

Keywords: conversation, intercultural, design, socio-technical, things

## Workshop description

The benefits of intercultural collaboration are many. There are, however, significant negative consequences of failing to apply tools for effective intercultural collaboration. Intercultural teams can experience a loss of expertise through mismatched salience (Collins, Evans, 2007) and defensive behaviors (Watt, 2007). Moreover, the lack of trust negatively impacts collaboration and team performance (Erdem, Ozen, and Atsan, 2003, Hannesdottir et al., Morel, 2014). To overcome difficulties in collaborating across cultures, team members tend to focus on what is common to one another (Janis, 1972), as opposed to leveraging everyone's uniqueness and distinctive expertise. Cooperative designing across boundaries and cultures is difficult. In service design teams in particular, this challenge is not new. Service designers have always needed to work cooperatively. Traditional models such as the Double-Diamond (Stickdorn et al., 2018; UK Design Council, 2015) display how designers are encouraged to work towards singular views of design problems and situations. We argue, however, that learning techniques and skills to work through differences and conflicts by enhancing and leveraging diverse perspectives is key for the service design practice (Björgvinsson, Ehn, and Hillgren, 2012). Designers need strategies to better collaborate in culturally diverse, yet welcoming workplaces. Finding common aspects or common ground building (Clark and Brennan 1991, Buchanan, 2019; Ciliotta Chehade, 2020; Keating and Jarvenpää 2016) among team members while also fostering an environment that encourages “listening across differences” (Young, 2020) is a powerful resource, and fundamental for fostering more productive achievement of goals (Earley and Peterson, 2004).

Through this workshop experience, we leverage working with differences rather than seeing them as a problem to be overcome. We will demonstrate how designing for conversations to enhance intercultural interactions is possible, showing the importance of objects as mediums to trigger associations to past cultural experiences, backgrounds, memories, mental models (Forrester, 1971; Dubberly, 2009), and feelings. We explore how evocative (Turkle, 2007) and discursive objects (Tharp, Tharp, 2018) within a game-like frame (Arnold Mages, 2021) can help create awareness of the different mental models in the room, allowing for diverse ways of making sense.



## Session set-up

Using a variety of objects as evocative mediums, participants will share memories associated with their culture. The workshop is intended to foster awareness towards cultural differences and similarities, allowing participants to interact in a different way than a typical workplace context. The following is a summary outline of the activities: 1) introductory welcome; 2) icebreaking through evocative objects; 3) openness: reflecting on the objects; 4) openness, empathy, and awareness: group conversation; 5) awareness: visualizing cultural similarities and differences; 6) common ground building and discussion; 7) reflection; 8) closing survey. Each stage incorporates different material prompts to spark conversations, utilizing the objects as discursive mediums to drive the conversation towards embracing different perspectives.

## Learning objectives/goal for participants

1. Build awareness of cultural differences and similarities by exploring diversity of backgrounds, perspectives, and mental models associated with the objects.
2. Develop awareness that alternative worldviews might see “things” differently.
3. Reframe difference as a resource to enhance diversity of perspectives within the service design process by experiencing common ground building techniques.
4. Support openness, intercultural awareness, and communication, setting the ground for trust and collaboration to emerge.

## Space requirements

We will be bringing the object kits, sharpies, post-its and handouts/survey worksheets. We will need a room with tables and chairs that we can set up accordingly — ideally round tables where 5-6 participants can be seated. Computer-connectable projector with screen, pinup or magnetic whiteboard.

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## Convenors bio:

**Convenor 1:** Estefania Ciliotta Chehade is an international expert on working effectively with cross-cultural teams. She holds an MFA of Experience Design, was born in Peru and has worked in many different countries and industries. She has observed and researched innovative practices in team building for international teams, impacts on service and experience design practices, as well as redesign of healthcare and AI systems.

**Convenor 2** Michael Arnold Mages holds a PhD in Design, and for the last 10 years has convened, facilitated and conducted research on best practices for designing community conversations. His work has been applied for critical hires, redesign of workplace systems, creation of governmental policy and services.

