

Differentiation/Integration

Groups find their own balance of differentiation (finding differences, and working in small groups) and integration (finding similarities or working as a whole unit). It is as predictable as an individual breathing: inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale. A smart design will have activities with both types of activities to support the group's natural pattern.

For example, participants often like to start with stories about themselves or another form of self-introduction. In Western cultures, for example, the rhythm begins with focus on individual identity: "I am." (That's differentiation.) The rhythm then shifts to the collective: participants become ready for their individual identity to be integrated with a group identity. (Integration.)

Group identity may be the whole group, or a subgroup. Participants may integrate into a collective identity smaller than the whole group, like gender, or race, or some affinity. If you design for subgroups you reduce the need for informal cliques to form which leave some participants out.

If participants spend time in these subgroups there emerges the need to integrate into the whole group. Here's the thing to watch for: if you design a lot of time in the whole group, notice that there arises a need again for differentiation – back to affinity groups or back to individual level, or each in turn.

When you teach, realize that groups develop not in a straight-line progression, but in a rhythm of alternating modes. Yes, there is a balance between the participant's need to maintain integrity and the need to bond with a group -- but don't expect the balance to exist at any given moment. The balance is struck over time, through the alternating rhythm. In group life it's as natural as breathing is for the individual: inhale. . . exhale. . . differentiate . . . integrate. Trying to run a workshop constantly in whole group format is as effective as asking yourself only to exhale. Suffocation is not pro-learning.

A CROSS-CULTURAL NOTE

Different cultures have preferences. US culture idealize individualism and therefore differentiation. Mainstream USers are often even *proud* that their country does not sign on to the international treaties every other country has. A design implication is that we start with individual introductions.

Burmese culture, on the other hand, values communalism and may avoid any mention of individual ideas until much later into a workshop. One training they only did any differentiation on day three of a five day workshop. Therefore, more large group work is acceptable and the design emphasized *group* work, rather than individual story-telling.