

Barnga

A game about inter-cultural awareness

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On my holiday to Goa in India, I was disgusted to find that almost every restaurant served curry. I don't like spicy food at all.

It took us nine hours to fly home from Jamaica to England it only took the Americans three hours to get home. There are too many Spanish people [in Spain]. The receptionist speaks Spanish. The food is Spanish. Too many foreigners now live abroad.

No-one told us there would be fish in the sea. The children were startled.

Extracts from feedback to a UK travel agency.

Introduction

Barnga is a card game whose deceptive simplicity beautifully replicates aspects of social development. In this version the briefing and debriefing are shaped specifically to generate discussion about how organisations develop their cultures, operate and are passed on.

Time required

One to two hours, depending on the number of players, time available and choice of session formats as set out below.

Number of participants

12 or more and preferably a number divisible by 4.

Resources

- Instruction sheets [see EAC Resources 5 Tricks sheets - each has a unique variation to the rules]
- Modified pack of playing cards for each table [Ace to 6 in each suit = 28 cards per set]

Setting

Barnga can be played wherever tables for four players can be arranged with a reasonable distance between each table so that actions at one table do not impinge on others nearby. Six to eight tables (24 to 28 players) is probably best but Barnga can be played with as few as twelve players and as many as 36.

Time Needed

60-120 minutes. This activity can generate lengthy discussions so enough time must be allowed for intensive discussion at the end of the action. If you have an hour uses the following timing:

Briefing [Introduction]

5 minutes (more if you use participants to arrange the furniture)

Action [the play period]

25-30 minutes.

Debriefing

25-30 minutes. *NB - Shorten the action to ensure enough time for discussion.*

If you have 2 hours – extend the action and debriefing time and include reflective writing, small group discussion or other activities outlined below.

Purpose: Opportunities to explore

- How different cultures perceive things differently, and/or play by different rules
- Ways to reconcile these differences with personal values and goals
- How to function effectively in cross-cultural groups
- How initial perceptions and enculturation shape later behaviours
- How preparation for a professional career can influence individual understanding of problems and goals
- How to develop personal flexibility and resilience in the face of uncertainty
- Why it takes time to adjust to changing circumstances and how to use such experiences

Description

Participants play a simple card game - called "Five Tricks" in groups of four, using a reduced pack of cards.

Participants play to win points, which are tallied. The owner of the highest score moves one table clockwise, the owner of the lowest tally moves one table anti-clockwise.

As the next round begins those who have moved are faced with the dilemma of playing by the rules they know, while slowly understanding that they are at a table where other – unknown - rules are apparently in play. Although things initially look familiar, small changes in each table's rules create major differences in how to win. The ensuing confusion simulates that often felt on encountering unfamiliar cultures.

Players have to split their attention between the action of the game and the need to adjust their expectations and understanding of what is happening. Enforced silence throughout play increases the difficulty – players have to work out how to communicate the nature of their problems and find solutions, without speech. Since they are not warned about the differences in the rules, some strive to understand what is happening while others try to impose their understanding of the rules on others. Either choice creates dilemmas for all players and the dynamics of cross-cultural encounters are played out unconsciously. All of this provides the basis for discussion during the debriefing [post play discussion].

Process

Assign players to tables and when they are settled announce that they are going to be playing a game that provides opportunities for exploration of human behaviour in workplaces. As you are talking place an instruction sheet and one card pack on each table. Do not pre-empt the kinds of things they might experience, simply ask them to focus on the play and pay close attention to how they interact with others. Do not read out the instructions or mention that they may be moving around, or in any way suggest there might be anything untoward coming up.

Preparation

Announce that they have a few minutes to become familiar with the rules before the competition begins. Such a phrase will help pre-set the aura of 'competitive play' and ensure they focus on learning their rules.

Round One

Once you are sure all tables have played a couple of hands of "Five Tricks" and are becoming comfortable with the action, announce that competition is about to begin. Ask them to return all cards to the deck, return the deck to whoever is the first dealer and then begin competitive play.

Announce with a flourish that there is "**one new rule**". From now on there is to be NO talking about anything.

NB - You may want to tell them of a time limit, or simply let the first cycle get under way and end it after about five minutes *and* after you have completed the next vital step.

It is imperative that ALL instruction sheets are removed from ALL tables. The more unobtrusively you can do this, the more difficulty players will have in comprehending that there are changes in the sheets once movement between tables begins in next cycle of play.

You may also want to award 'prizes' for each winner at each table at the end of each cycle. This is optional, and prizes do not seem to influence the intensity of play in most instances, nor do they seem to affect the quality of the discussion afterwards. If you do use 'prizes' a selection of small chocolates or other sweets is all that is needed.

Round Two

Allow enough play to ensure there have been enough complete rounds to allow high and low scores to emerge. Ask for the high scorers at each table to identify themselves by standing up. In the event of tied scores check that they have played 'Paper, Rock, Scissors' and tell them all to move one table clockwise from their present position. If this is difficult to identify – i.e. the tables are scattered around the room rather than in a neat circular arrangement stand in the centre of the room and use your arm as a clock hand to indicate 'clockwise'. Allow them to do the table selection and settling in for themselves. The game is about encountering new context through an unsettling/resetting process – so avoid doing anything to reduce the impact of any unease.

Once they are settled ask those with the lowest score to stand up and move one table in an anti-clockwise direction [again indicating this if needed] to the next table. Emphasise that there is to be no talking.

Announce that the next round must begin at once and that they have 4 minutes for play.

Round Three

At the end of four minutes call stop, ask for the tallies to be completed, high and low scores to be identified and decided by "Paper, Rock, Scissors" [where needed] and then ask the high and low scorers to identify themselves as before, and again to move in clockwise and anti-clockwise directions as for the previous round.

This time you may not need to be directive in guiding table selection. They have now completed the process once – and some confusion will help keep the atmosphere 'different' from usual routines and help sustain the atmosphere.

Announce they have **three** minutes to complete as many hands as possible in this round. You can if you wish actually give them longer – players will not notice. Time behaves differently for most people once they are immersed in a game.

Round Four

Repeat the process as before and announce they only have two minutes to complete this round. They are by now both familiar with the game and also likely to be more wary of emerging differences, so a time limit will help focus attention.

Again do not be directive in guiding table selection. They have now completed the process once – and some confusion will help keep the atmosphere ‘different’ from usual routines and sustain the atmosphere.

Additional rounds

Whether you use more rounds will depend on the size of the whole group and the amount of time available. If you have 6 or more tables it may be useful to run 6 rounds, but do not use more than that regardless of the total group size. NEVER run so many rounds that you do not have sufficient time for a lengthy debriefing.

Ending

Announce the end of round four [or six which ever you choose to use] and ask them to tally but not to move. Tell them that play has concluded and the next step is to discuss what happened and to return to the purpose of the game as announced at the beginning.

Debriefing

To do this effectively you need a plan in place that suits the size of the group, the room layout and your learning focus. Included below are three possible ways to conduct a debriefing. There are many others you may want to explore at some time. However all useful and effective approaches to debriefing share the following characteristics:

1. Participants are
 - a. seated in a way that ensures everyone can see and be seen by everyone
 - b. encouraged to draw their own conclusions and ‘make meaning’ of their experiences
 - c. cautioned against imposing their meaning on others’ experiences
 - d. not rushed – they have time to formulate ideas and have their say
2. The educator
 - a. uses a sequence of questions to guide the discussion
 - b. offers observations and comments
 - c. avoids ‘telling the meaning’ of events and actions
 - d. makes minimum interventions in the discussion
 - e. focuses on ensuring that everyone has a say, using a sequence of questions to guide discussion
3. Enough time is provided to allow everyone to have their say and to listen to others
4. There is no talking over others
5. Whatever is said is relevant at least to the speaker so is respected and considered
6. Sharing of observations and interpretations is encouraged and supported
7. Real world parallels are encouraged and sought out

Debriefing in a large group

Rearrange the group around the room so that everyone can see and be seen. Have them remain together in the last group of playing.

Introduce the debriefing with words such as “now that we’re finished the game, it’s time to discuss what happened, how you were feeling, and how it all relates to the world outside this room.”

1 Ask “What happened?” – and use this to open the discussion.

Since everyone will begin at a different point, keep track of the comments and where necessary guide the conversation to draw out the sequence of events. As a guide to keeping the conversation moving, ask such things as -

- When did you realise things had changed?
- How did you explain these changes and problems to each other?
- How did you each respond to the changes?
- Did you accept what others did/ showed you?
- Or did you want others to do as you said?
- How did information get passed on?
- Did things get easier or harder as time passed?

Invite comments from those who moved, and then those who did not. Draw out comparisons and contrasts between the two sets of experiences. Watch for comments that will be relevant for the final stage of the discussion when the topic has moved to parallels with the real world.

2 *After about 8 to 10 minutes move the conversation to the second question - "What feelings did you experience?"*

Typically the answers will include 'confusion', 'lost', 'angry', 'bewildered' 'mixed up', 'puzzled', 'uncertain about what to do'.

- Prompt speakers for explanations about what caused their various emotions
- Ask them to focus on the exchanges and events that roused strong feelings
- Invite them to suggest other emotions they are reminded of
- Ask where else they have experienced such feelings, or seen or heard others talk about them
- Invite them to see if they can recall what exactly triggered the feelings

3 *Move to the third question - "How does all this relate to the real world?"*

The prior conversations have moved from action to feelings this final phase has the goal of helping participants make the connections between this simulated experience and their actual life experiences from the past and into the future. If the participants are not already making connections for themselves as they talk, ask –

- Have you been in a situation where you felt like this or saw such things happening?
- What was the situation? And how is it similar to the events here today?
- What actions - taken by you or anyone else – remind you of things you have seen elsewhere?

Debriefing in small groups

To draw out the individual experiences you can keep the participants in the small groups they are in at the final round and invite them to discuss the three guiding questions together – before bringing the whole group together for a large group review of these small group discussions.

Debriefing with mix of writing and talking

If the session is to be extended over two periods use this approach –

Have worksheets available for distribution - see Appendix here – and allow sufficient time for at least 10 minutes private writing time before the end of the session. Collect the sheets and invite participants to reflect more on the experience before the next meeting.

Read the sheets in the intervening period and draw up a number guiding questions based on their observations and comments with which to reenergise the discussion at the next meeting.

It is best not to attribute specific comments to individuals – although you can invite the writers to own their work if they recognise it and feel so inclined.

Debriefing conversation followed by writing

Once you have completed the debriefing as above – set these questions for a reflective journal entry. You may want to return to these later – or have them as part of a longer time use of such journals for developing personal insights and professional expertise.

Debriefing 'cascade'

This approach involves having pairs of participants discuss their unique experiences and establish some key observations, experiences and questions they want to bring up in the larger group. Allow 10 minutes for this conversation and then ask the pairs to form fours and share their ideas/questions/observations and identify what they have in common and what is different. Allow up to 10 minutes for this – during which they focus on combining common elements and listing the different ones for further discussion in the whole group.

Then call the whole group to attention and invite each quartet to report - in round one on similarities, and in round 2 on the differences and use the themes that emerge to guide the final discussion.