



# ISSSTRAINS

## Stumbling Blocks to Intercultural Communication

Presented by:  
Kimberly Yau

**I ILLINOIS**

International Student & Scholar Services

ILLINOIS INTERNATIONAL

# My Puzzling Intercultural Situation



# My Puzzling Intercultural Situation

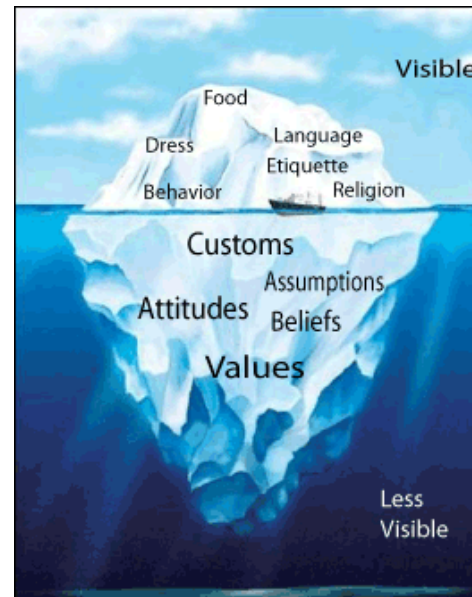
- Which stumbling blocks impeded effective and appropriate communication?
- What could I have done differently?

# What Puzzling Intercultural Situation have you had?

- Complete the worksheet and share with a partner!

# Intercultural Competence

- “A set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts.” – Janet M. Bennett, Ph.D., 2011



# Activity: Laray M. Barna's 6 Stumbling Blocks in Intercultural Communication (1994)

- “Stumbling Blocks”: Barriers and habits that may contribute to misunderstandings across cultures during intercultural communication.

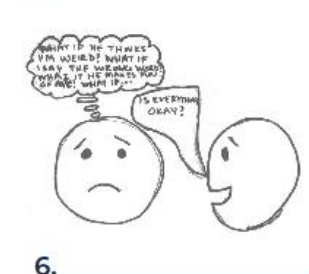
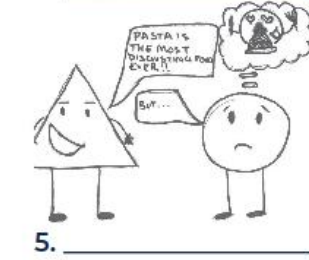
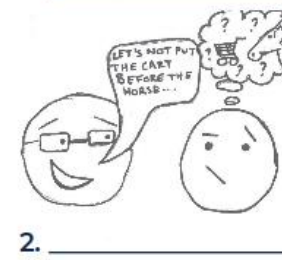
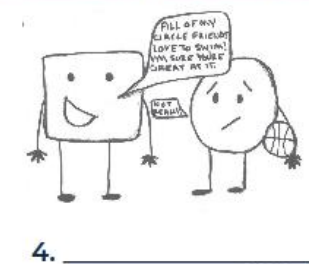
## Activity

- Each illustrated scenario represents one of the six stumbling blocks to communication.
- Determine which illustration represents each stumbling block.

# What stumbling block do you see?

- High Anxiety
- Tendency to Evaluate
- Stereotypes and Preconceptions
- Assumption of similarities
- Nonverbal Misinterpretations
- Language Differences

For each situation, write the name of the stumbling block on the line!



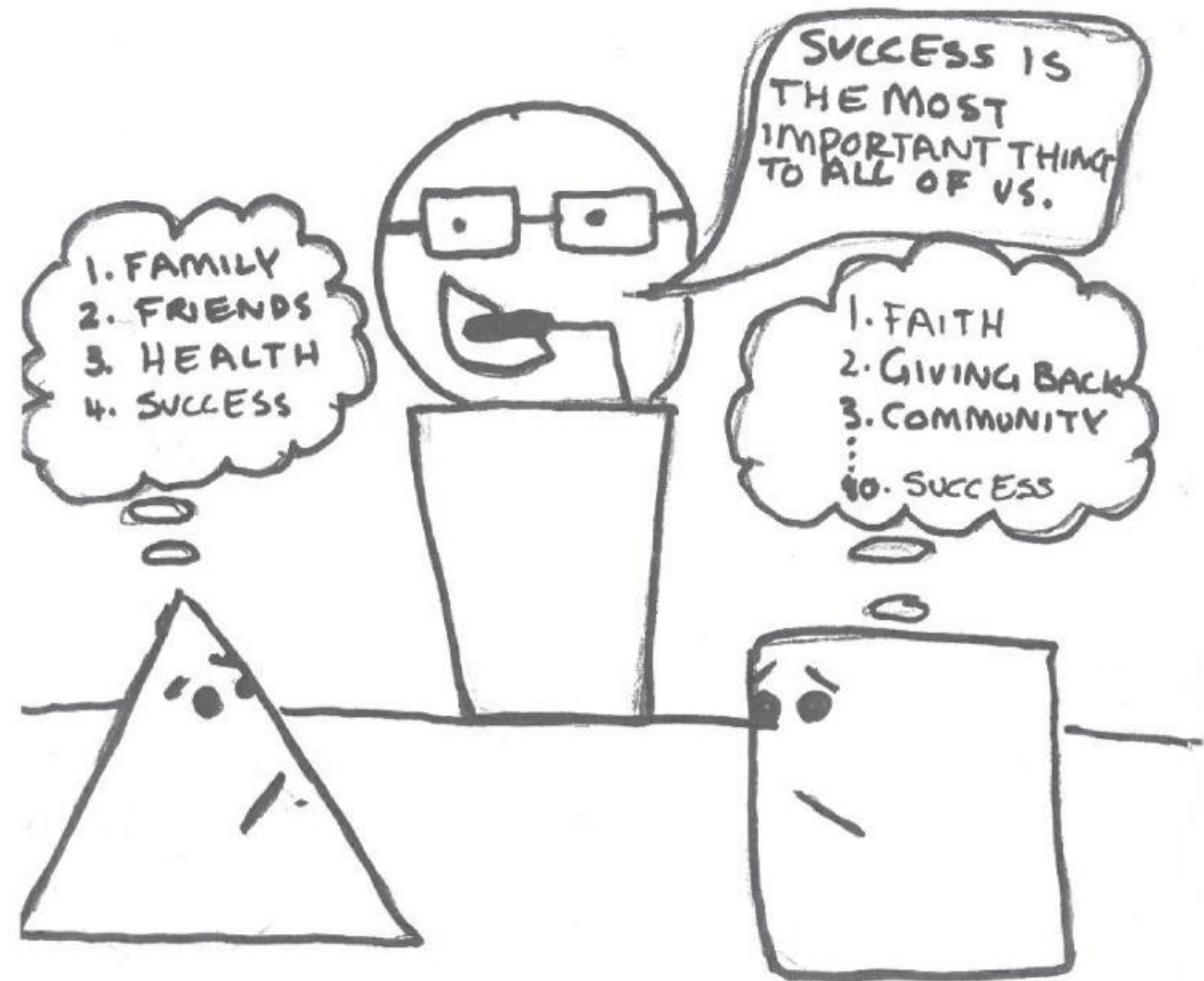
High Anxiety  
Tendency to Evaluate  
Stereotypes and Preconceptions

Assumption of similarities  
Nonverbal Misinterpretations  
Language Differences



# What stumbling block do you see?

- High Anxiety
- Tendency to Evaluate
- Stereotypes and Preconceptions
- Assumption of similarities
- Nonverbal Misinterpretations
- Language Differences





# Assumption of Similarities

- **Stumbling Block:** Believing that all people have the same fundamental ideas, values, and perspectives.
- **How is this an obstacle to communication?**
  - Cultural (and personal!) differences lead to different meanings.
  - Practice note: When in doubt, ask!

# Assumption of Similarities

## How can we avoid this stumbling block?

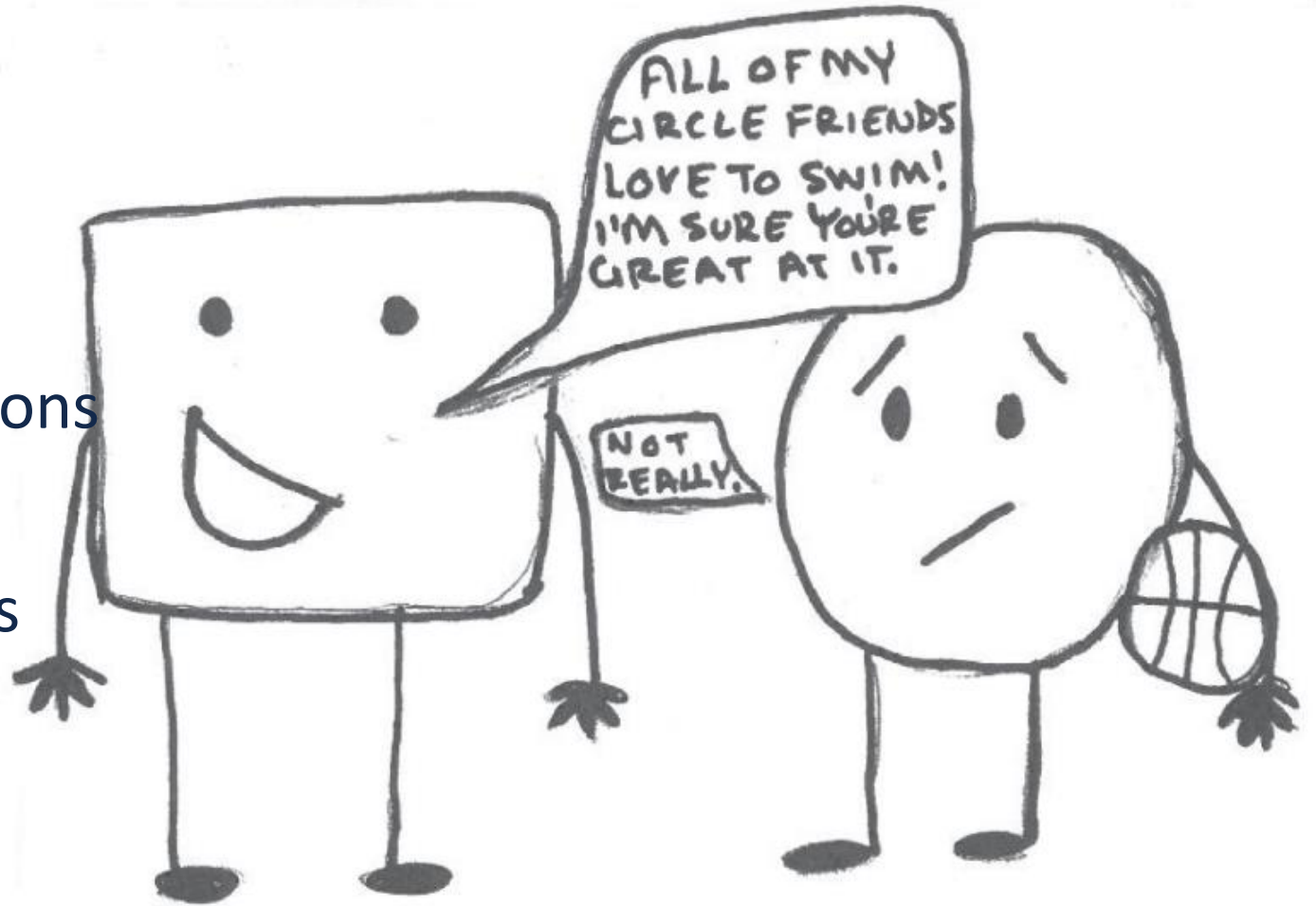
- Assume difference!
- Ask open-ended questions.

## Examples

- Friendship
- Family dynamics – independence

# What stumbling block do you see?

- High Anxiety
- Tendency to Evaluate
- Stereotypes and Preconceptions
- ~~Assumption of similarities~~
- Nonverbal Misinterpretations
- Language Differences



# Stereotypes and Preconceptions

- **Stumbling Block:** Using overgeneralized, possibly inaccurate beliefs to make sense of situations or predict interactions
- **How Is This an Obstacle to Communication**
  - Cause offense and lead to shutdown and withdrawal.
  - Miss important, unique aspects of the individual.

# Stereotypes and Preconceptions

## How can we avoid this stumbling block?

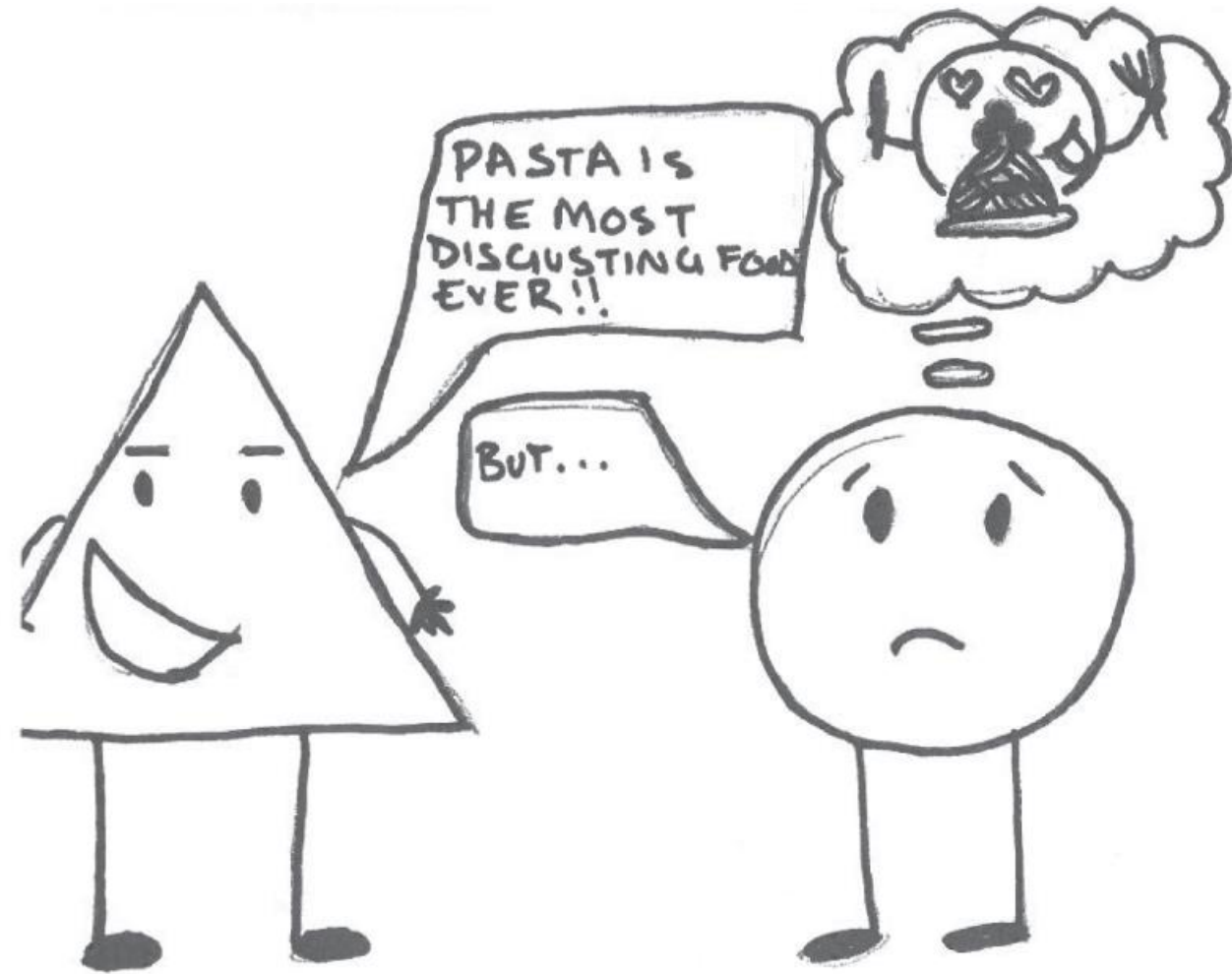
- Use generalizations as a springboard for interaction, but do not stereotype

## Examples

- Physical touch

# What stumbling block do you see?

- High Anxiety
- Tendency to Evaluate
- ~~Stereotypes and Preconceptions~~
- ~~Assumption of similarities~~
- Nonverbal Misinterpretations
- Language Differences



# Tendency to Evaluate

- **Stumbling Block:** Moving to judge something as “good” or “bad” based on whether or not it aligns with your own tastes or your own way of thinking.
- **How Is This an Obstacle to Communication?**
  - May isolate people or make them question their ability to safely express their cultural values within a new setting.
  - Snap evaluations often cloud interpretation.



# Tendency to Evaluate

## How can we avoid this stumbling block?

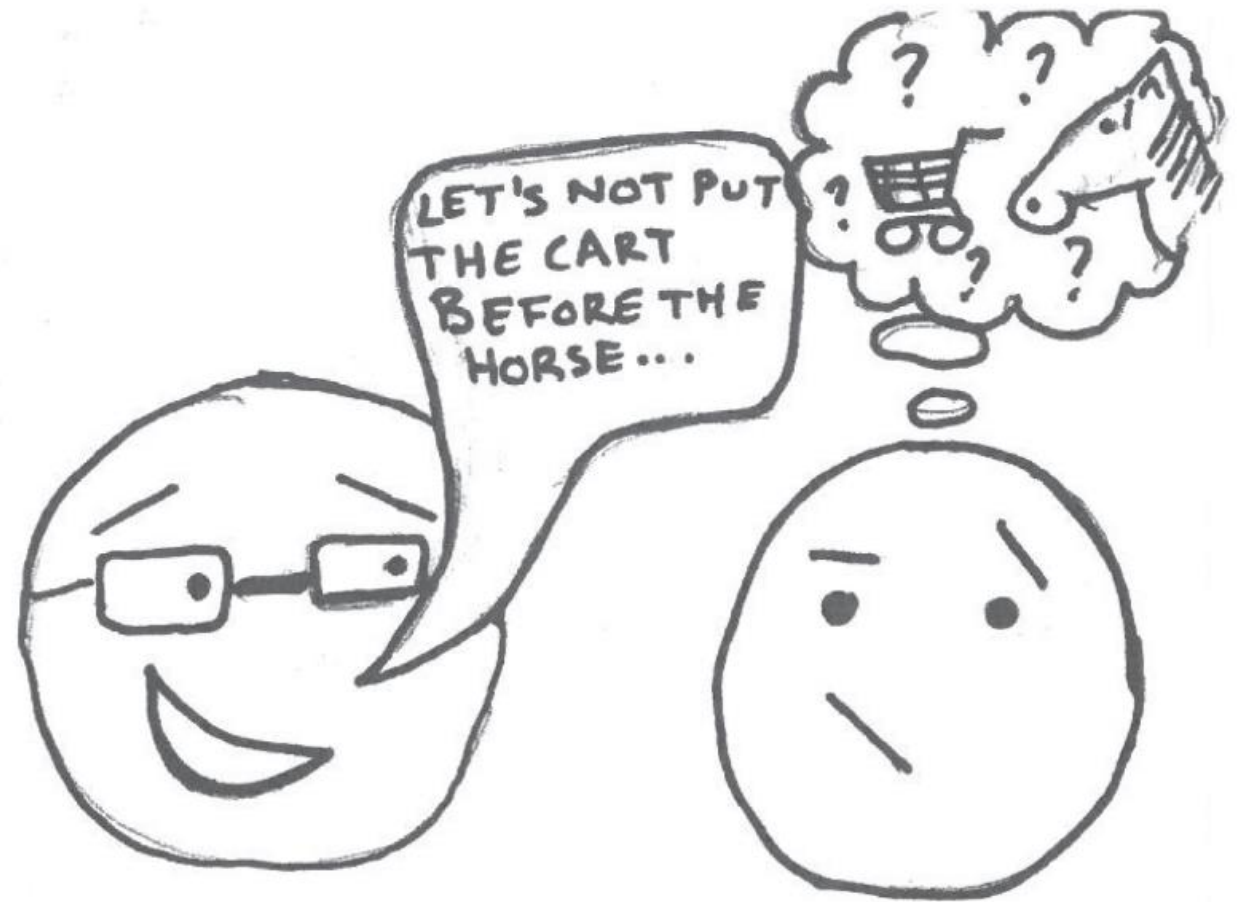
- “Don’t yuck my yum.”
- Do not assign negative value to something just because you do not understand it or personally like it.
- Practice Mindful Communication.

## Example

- Conflict management

# What stumbling block do you see?

- High Anxiety
- ~~Tendency to Evaluate~~
- ~~Stereotypes and Preconceptions~~
- ~~Assumption of similarities~~
- Nonverbal Misinterpretations
- Language Differences



# Language Differences

- **Stumbling Block:** Differences in vocabulary, idioms, slang, dialects, etc.
- **How Is This an Obstacle to Communication?**
  - Important details in the conversation may be missed.
  - Someone may be afraid to ask for clarification.
  - Can lead to frustration.
  - Example: “How are you?” basically means “Hello”

# Language Differences

## How can we avoid this stumbling block?

- Avoid (or explain) slang and abbreviations.
- Slow down speech.
- Repeat information or directions patiently.

## Examples

- Texting abbreviations

# Language Differences (slide 2 of 2)

## How can we avoid this stumbling block?

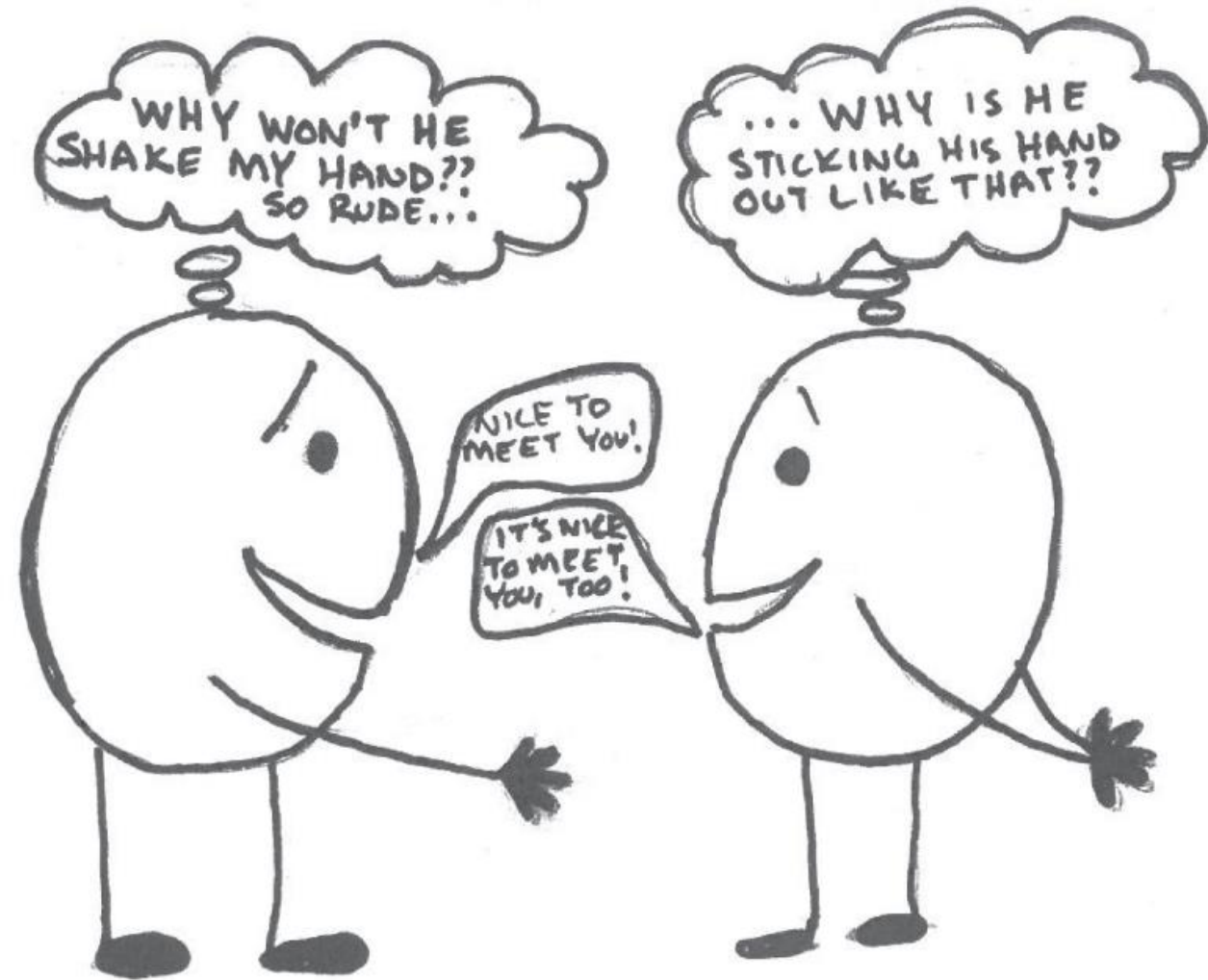
- Use stresses and pronunciation to convey meaning.
  - Question tone when you're asking a question
  - When you're done speaking.

## Discussion

- Share an example of a time when language differences caused confusion for you or someone you were speaking with.

# What stumbling block do you see?

- High Anxiety
- ~~Tendency to Evaluate~~
- ~~Stereotypes and Preconceptions~~
- ~~Assumption of similarities~~
- Nonverbal Misinterpretations
- ~~Language Differences~~



# Nonverbal Misinterpretations

- **Stumbling Block:** Physical gestures or facial expressions can mean completely different things to different people.
- **How Is This an Obstacle to Effective Communication?**
  - Gestures and facial expressions are culturally informed.



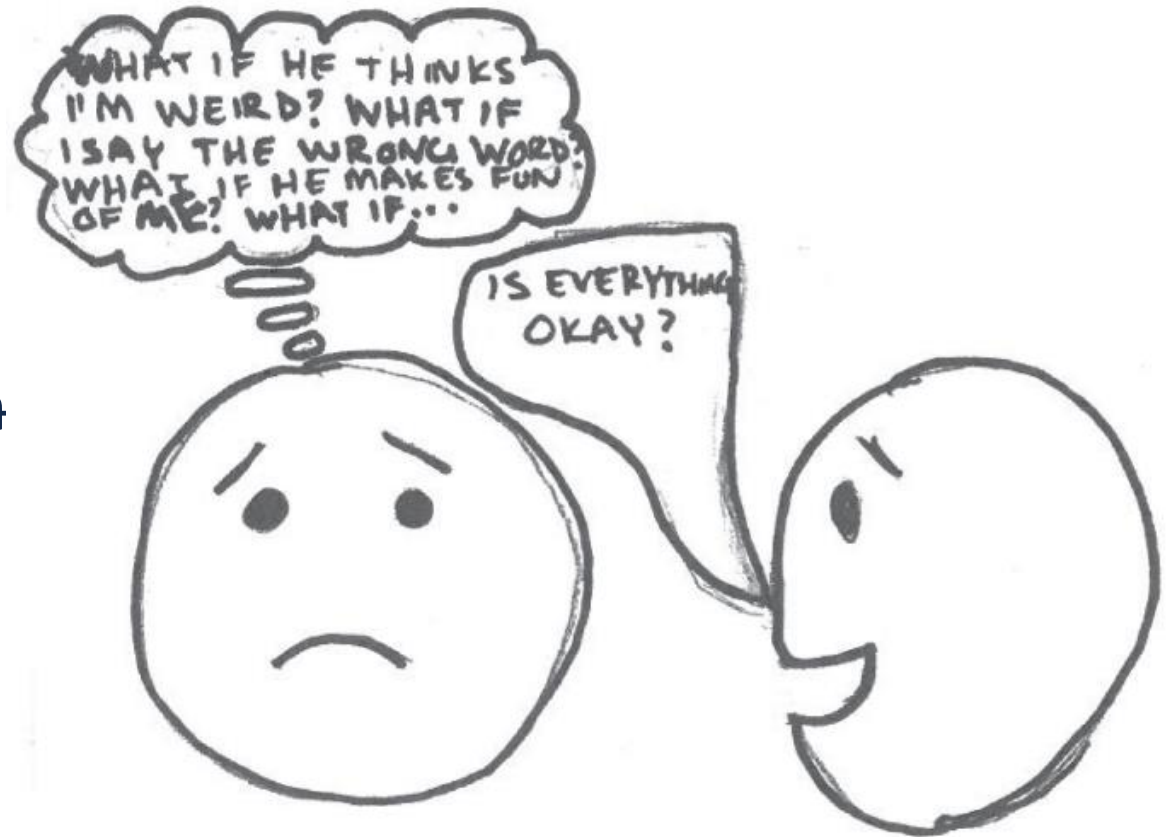
# Nonverbal Misinterpretations

## How can we avoid this stumbling block?

- Be aware of your body language (and how others react to it) when communicating with people.
- If possible, try to mirror the nonverbal communication style of the other person.

# What stumbling block do you see?

- High Anxiety
- ~~Tendency to Evaluate~~
- ~~Stereotypes and Preconception~~
- ~~Assumption of similarities~~
- ~~Nonverbal Misinterpretations~~
- ~~Language Differences~~



# High Anxiety

- Ties the other stumbling blocks together.
- **Stumbling Block**: Stress or tension caused by a lack of experience in communicating across cultures or within a specific culture (example: culture shock).
- **How Is This an Obstacle to Communication?**
  - Frustration may cause one or both participants to shut down or give up on trying to communicate.

# High Anxiety

## How can we avoid this stumbling block?

- Embrace discomfort and step outside of your comfort zone.
- Be supportive and patient with students who show signs of anxiety or culture shock or who are not forthcoming.

# My Puzzling Intercultural Situation

- What should I have done differently?



# Discussion

- Which stumbling blocks might help explain your puzzling intercultural interaction?
- What could you have done to overcome that stumbling block?
- What stumbling blocks might impede communication in your daily work?
- How might you overcome those stumbling blocks?

# Questions?



# Thank you!

Contact us:

iss Illinois.edu

[kyau87@illinois.edu](mailto:kyau87@illinois.edu)