

Evaluating Study Abroad's Past, Fashioning its Future

Caution: 'U' and 'W' Curves Ahead!

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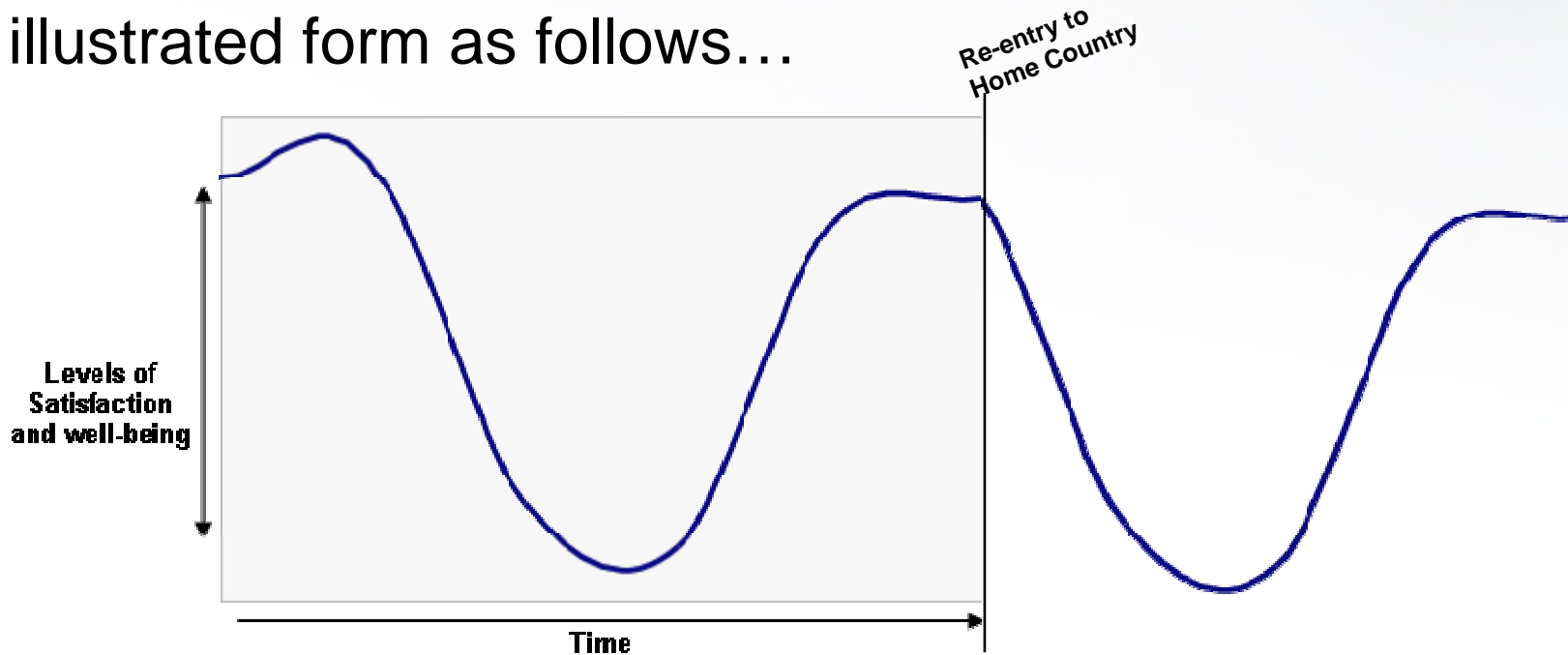
Thursday, November 15



Definition - U-Curve (& W-Curve)



A model designed to describe the emotional adjustment process of cross-cultural sojourns over time. The 'U' shape suggests sojourner's emotional well-being begins positively, dips to a negative state, and eventually returns to positive levels of satisfaction. It is commonly depicted in illustrated form as follows...



Common Assumptions About the U-Curve Model



1. There is one main pattern of adjustment that most people experience
2. The model can be applied to various kinds of sojourners
3. There are fixed times over which the U-curve typically occurs
4. The model has empirical support

Disconcerting Facts



1. A certain percentage of students always report they had no experience of 'culture shock' going or coming back!
2. Patterns of adjustment are *significantly* and *persistently* different for certain groups (Global Nomads, TCK's, heritage-seeking students, children of recent immigrants, and minorities etc.)!
3. When problems are encountered, their severity is relatively unpredictable and, at times, extends over years, especially post-reentry!

Study: The U-Curve in Practice



How is the U-curve model currently being used and evaluated in practice?

Berardo (2006). The U-curve of Adjustment: A study in the evolution and evaluation of a 50-year old model.

The Original Study



Lysgaard (1955) studying 198 Norwegian Fulbright students:

Adjustment as a process over time seems to follow a U-shaped curve: adjustment is felt to be easy and successful to begin with; then follows a 'crisis' in which one feels less well adjusted, somewhat lonely and unhappy; finally one begins to feel better adjusted again, becoming more integrated into the foreign community. (1955: 51)



Note that...

- There was no illustration of this U-curve
- It was a cross-sectional, retrospective design
- Some interviewees were reflecting on experiences of up to three years prior
- Three different groups of students were studied (<6 mo. → 6-18 mo. → 18+ mo)

Lysgaard recognized the limitations of his study. The U-curve was a hypothesis, needing further testing.

Empirical Testing of the Model



54 years of testing...

- Church (1982):
U-curve support is: 'weak, inconclusive and over-generalized' (542).
- Black & Mendenhall (1991):
'The lack of methodological rigor in many of the studies makes generalizing their results problematic.'
'a rejection or acceptance of the U-curve by scholars or cross-cultural trainers would be premature.' (231)
- 1991-2006 Studies
Additional testing, more challenges
Furnham & Bochner – When is a U not a U?

...And still no conclusive support

Top Conceptual Criticisms



1. Initial Euphoria (Honeymoon)
2. Simplicity of the Model
3. General Applicability & Usefulness
4. One Pattern Assumption

Dismissal in Academia...



The U-curve has been on-trial now for almost 40 years, and the time is long overdue to render a verdict. Despite its popular and intuitive appeal, the U-curve model of sojourner adjustment should be rejected. (Ward, 1998: 290)

The Popularity of the Model



‘How has the model survived conceptual criticisms and empirical arguments?’ (Ward et al, 2001: 82).

- 1) it is *intuitively appealing*
- 2) it has *occasional support*; and,
- 3) there are *few alternatives*.

And...



- TOP FINDINGS -

Why is the model still popular?

#1: The Adjustment Package



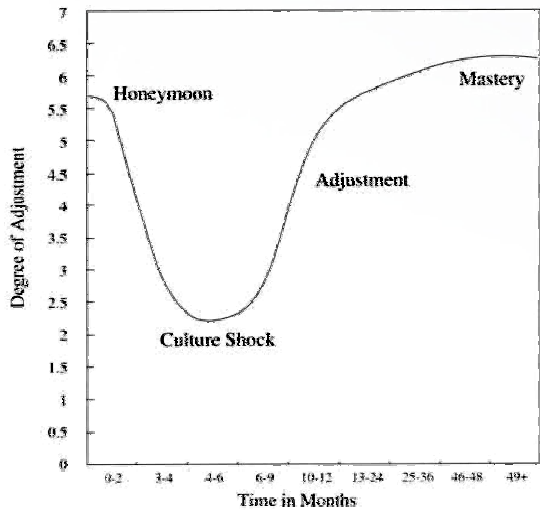
In literature, the U-curve is often presented as part of an *adjustment package* along with ‘culture shock’, and stages of adjustment.

‘Culture shock’ and stages of adjustment have also come under criticism.

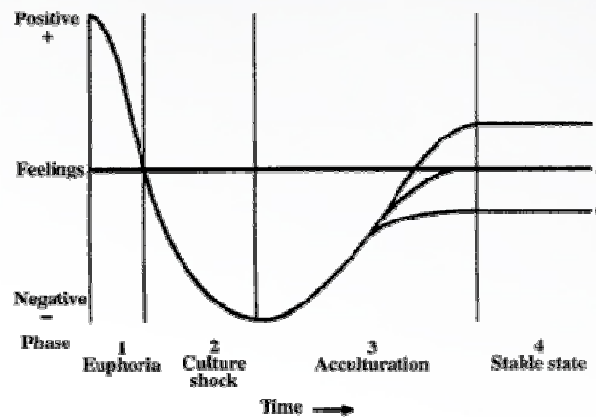
#2: The Photocopying Effect



Illustrations of *varying complexity* often accompanied descriptions of the model.



VS.



VS.



#2: The Photocopying Effect



What gets lost, beside detail?...

For one thing, the background on the model...

- *'Research shows that most people / 'Studies show .../ "Studies indicate' / 'The model is well researched... / 'Many studies have been done'... / It has been the **subject of an extensive literature***
- *Studies from Chang (1973); Deutsch and Won (1963); Morris (1960); Oberg (1960) and Smalley (1963) also **confirmed** the U-curve movement of intercultural adaptation.*
- ***Sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists** have divided the culture shock or fatigue phenomenon into stages. They say... / **Experts speak of / Most scholars agree.***

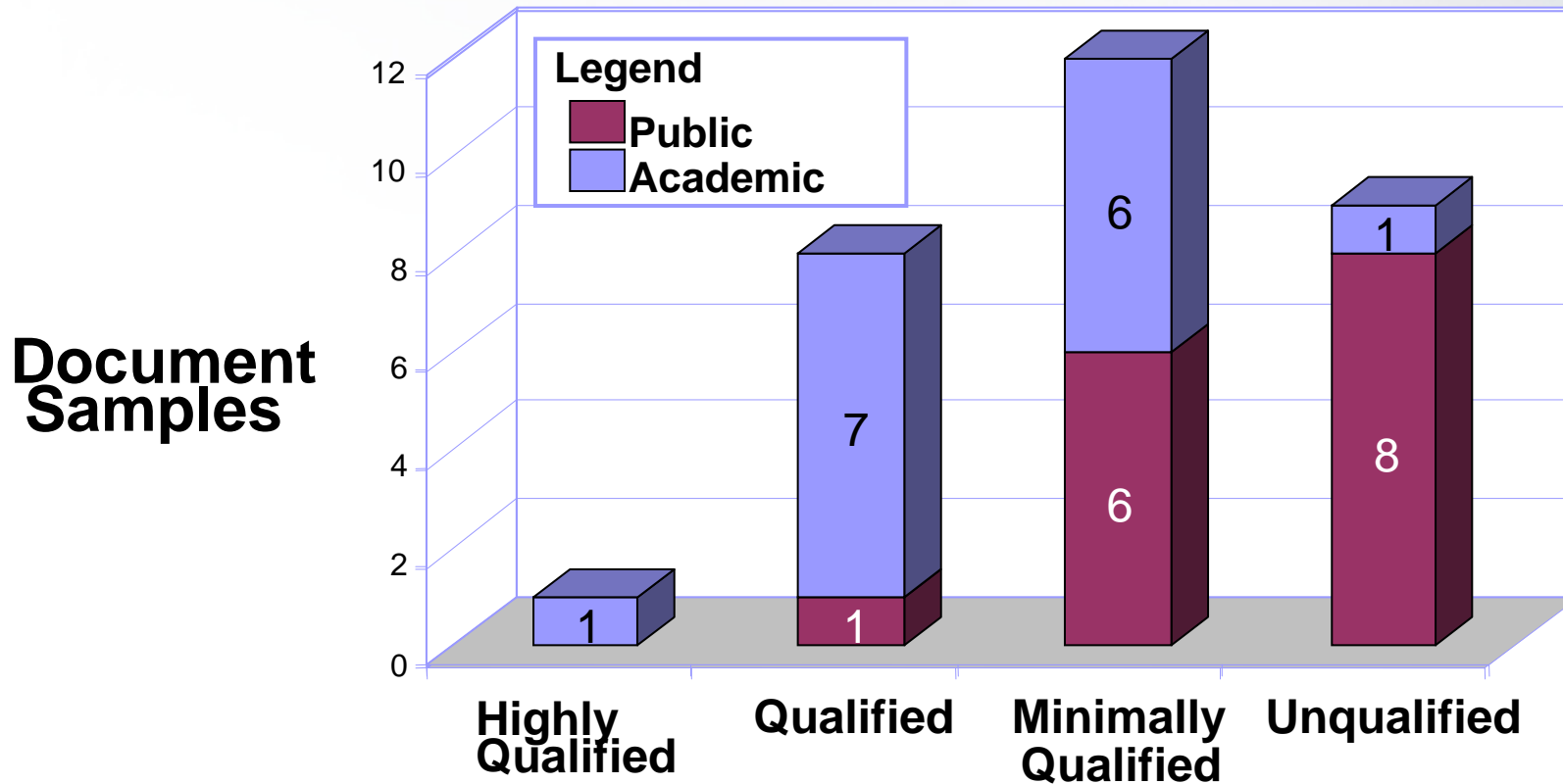
One-third of the sources suggested the U-curve model has backing at academic level.

#2: The Photocopying Effect



Also, the controversy...

Many sources made *little or no acknowledgement of the controversy or limitations of the model.*



Photocopying Effect Mirrored in CCT



The degree to which trainers noted the limitations of the model *varied considerably.*

Low Confidence: *Each model has its limits, several expatriates say they never go through these stages / The U-curve is a gross exaggeration or simplification...the graphed line can look as different as there are numbers of people.*

Mid Level Confidence: *This is **one depiction** of an adjustment cycle that (**most people**) will experience / This U-curve process **most likely happens to every expat***

High Confidence: *Certain phenomena like **honeymoon...are inevitable.** / It **happens to everyone** and it **WILL** happen to you! / **Everyone goes through this ...***

Many trainers were not aware of the *origins or controversy behind the model.*

#3: Perceived Value in CCT



The U-curve is being used frequently

- 94% had used the U-curve model in CCT
- Nearly half employ it in 91-100% of their programs.

Trainers generally perceive the model to be *accurate* and *valuable*.

- Rated to be *important* and *somewhat effective*.
- Most believed that the U-curve's overall shape is *accurate*

Trainers rated the initial euphoria as being the most accurate

Why use the model?



- What is the (heuristic) value of using the U-curve model in CCT?
- What learning objectives does it achieve?

Based on your discussion, come up with what you consider the top 3 strengths of the model in CCT.

Purpose & Strength of the Model



Reasons for Using the U-Curve

- To establish the 'normalness' of adjustment challenges (while still appreciating the individuality of the process as well)
- To enable more realistic expectations of the adjustment process & transition
- To introduce the need for preparing for adjustment challenges and developing coping strategies

Reported Strengths of the model

- Easy to understand and identify with
- Provides a clear visual that's easy to remember
- Gives participants a model and vocabulary to help them make sense of their and family members' experiences

Danger in Using the Model



The Triple-Threat:

- **Trainees** – false expectations; simplistic understanding of adjustment challenges; potential for conceptual confusion
- **Trainers** – false justification; poor reflection on training/trainer; undoes depth/complexity of work
- **Field** – model from infancy in field, rigor of research exposed

Danger in Using the Model



The medical or illness model of culture shock is counterproductive and misleading, yet an unfortunate result of the desire of many sojourners to have a simple formula for dealing with culture shock with concrete descriptions and directions. Of course, when they get overseas they find they may not have all the symptoms and stress manifests itself in complex psychological disorders The distress does not follow any pattern and they are not sure where they are on the so-called U- or W-curve of adjustment. The resultant confusion adds to their stress and gives them a lack of confidence in their pre-departure training. (Weaver, 1996b: 177)

Ethical Presentation of the U-curve



The U-Curve should be presented recognizing the:

- Lack of supporting research & dismissal by some theorists
- High degree of variability and individuality in adjustment over time
- Variety of patterns possible and documented in studies
- Variability in the initial period of euphoria
- Limited applicability to all sojourners

- & -

What the model does and does not cover

Time to Retire the U-Curve?

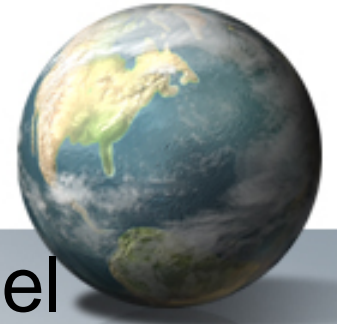


Do the strengths of the model outweigh its weaknesses?

Is the U-curve model the ***best model*** for addressing the emotional challenges of adjustment?

Would ***retiring*** the U-curve model help ***advance*** both the study and practice of intercultural communication?

What are the Alternatives?



- Replacement 'Adjustment Over Time' Model
 - Alphabet Soup is no improvement
 - There is no 'one' model, therefore no replacement
- Short-term Workarounds
 - Curve Variants
- Existing Alternative Models
 - William Bridges Transition Model
 - Kim (2001) Diminishing Stress-Adaptation-Growth
 - Holmes-Rahe Life Stress Inventory
 - Casse (1980) Culture Shock Process

The Old Process



Show U-Curve

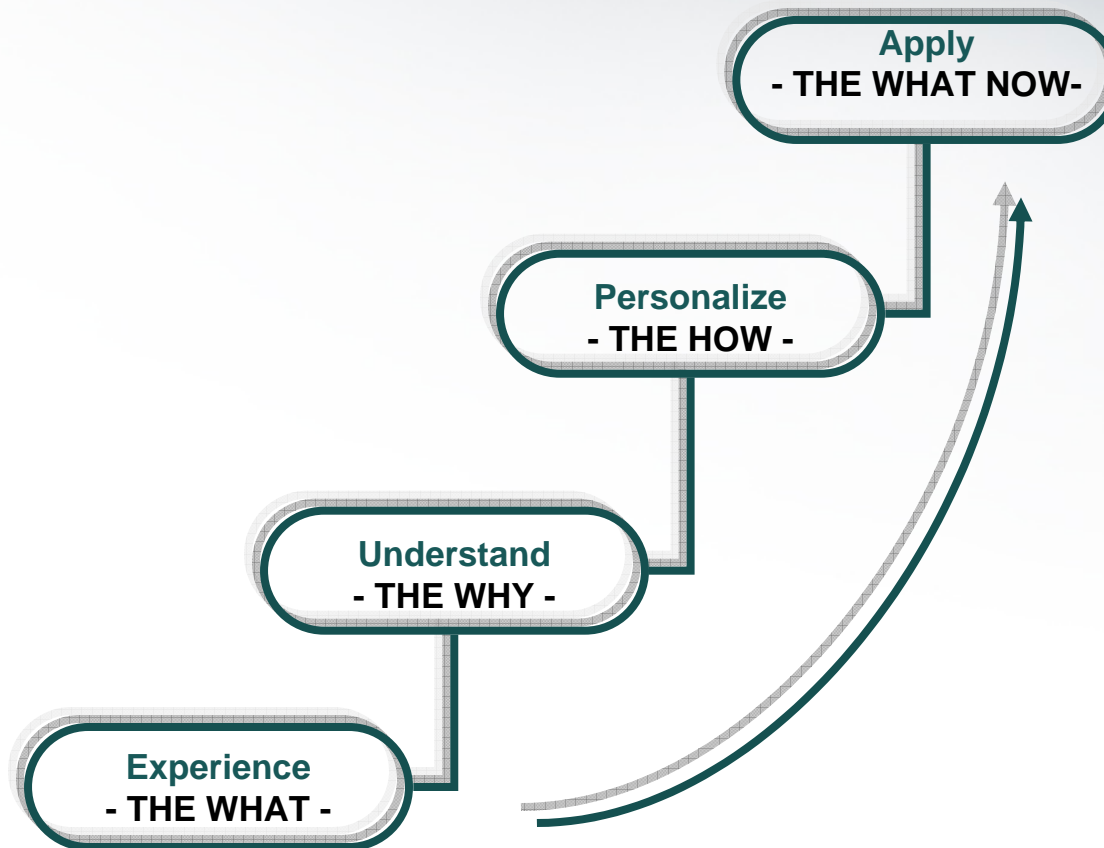
Describe 'Symptoms'
and/or Stages

Provide 'Coping Strategies' and
Suggestions to Ease Culture Shock

The New Process



4 Components of Transition Training (Berardo)



Sample: The 'Intelligence' Test



— means multiply

÷ means add

+ means divide

X means subtract

Answers



$$8 \times 2 = 16$$

$$12 \div 4 = 3$$

$$4 - 3 = 1$$

$$6 + 2 = 8$$

$$9 \div 3 = 3$$

$$7 - 4 = 3$$

$$4 \times 2 = 8$$

$$8 \div 4 = 2$$

$$12 - 2 = 10$$

$$20 \div 10 = 2$$

$$9 \div 1 = 9$$

$$5 \times 6 = 30$$

$$2 - 1 = 1$$

$$10 \div 5 = 2$$

$$12 \times 2 = 24$$

$$6 \times 6 = 36$$

$$8 \times 5 = 40$$

$$6 + 6 = 12$$

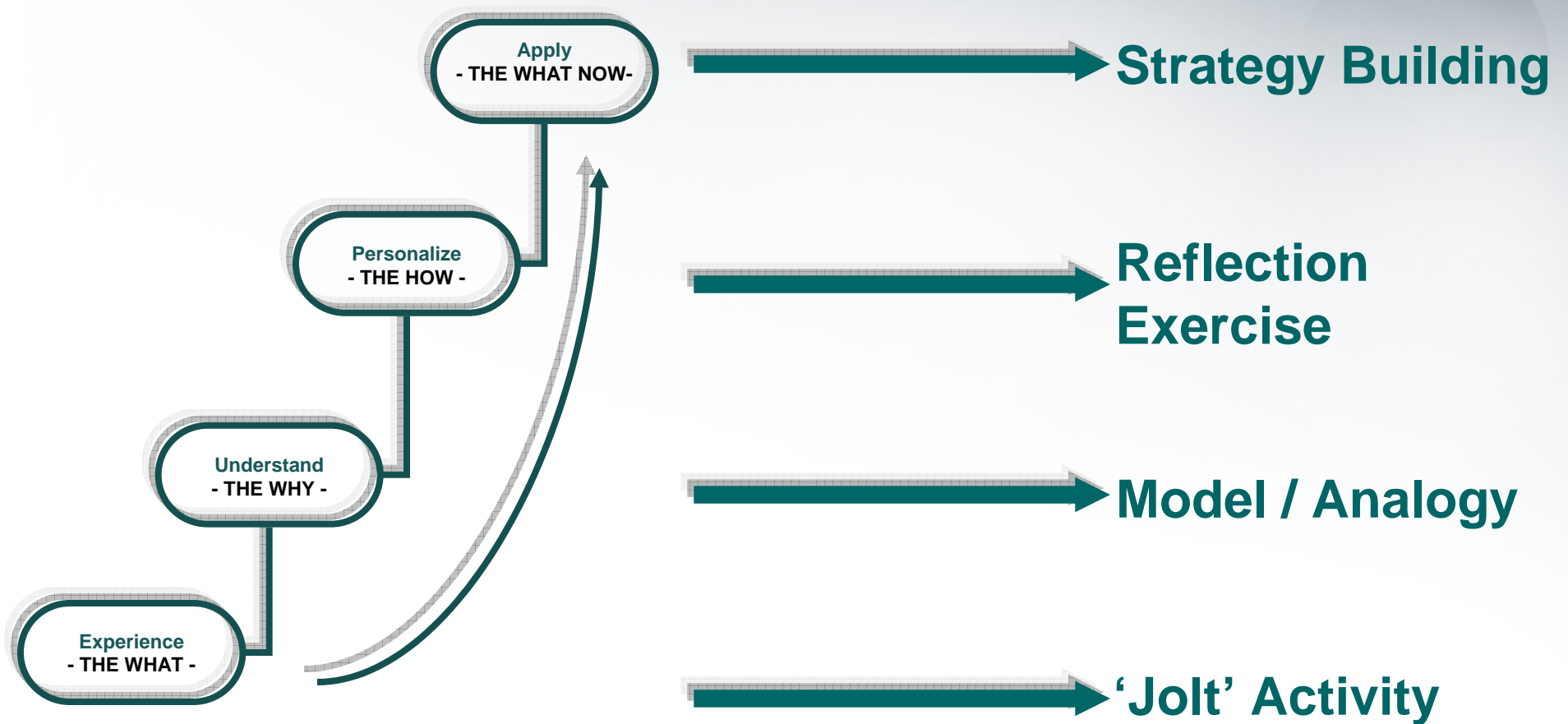
$$17 - 2 = 15$$

$$14 \times 7 = 98$$

Examples



4 Components of Transition Training (Berardo)





Copies of today's presentation available at:

www.culturocity.com/CIEEpresentation

Thank you!