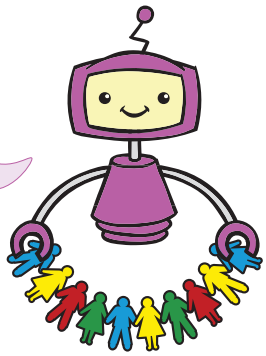
MODULE 13: WORK SHEET 1

Unwritten rules

Have you ever made a social *faux pas* because you didn't understand what you were supposed to do? Of course, I'm a robot, so I never make mistakes, although sometimes you humans are completely illogical! You say there is a rule for how to behave, but then you do something different.



LINKS TO:
Stage 3, Module 13
Learning Object 2: *Camp race*

PRIOR LEARNING:

Stage 1
Module 9 Work Sheet 8: *Behaving politely*
Stage 2
Module 9 Work Sheet 2: *It's my shout!*
Module 13 Work Sheet 7: *School obligations*

1 Does this look good on me?

When Peter and Anna arrived at camp in Learning Object 1, *We rule!* they were soon overwhelmed by all the rules they had to follow.

Like many of the rules you may be familiar with, the rules at camp are explicit. They are communicated in writing, or orally, to the people who are expected to abide by them.

These rules are often about acceptable behaviour; they help you understand what is expected of you, and what you are not permitted to do. Some explicit rules you will be familiar with include your school rules, and at least some of the state and federal laws of Australia.

Generally speaking, explicit rules are easy to understand and abide by.

It is much harder to identify, understand and abide by unspoken or unwritten rules.

Most unwritten rules relate to acceptable social behaviour, and therefore differ radically between cultures, ages, races and genders.

When working out what to do in a social situation, you may be faced with several dilemmas that stem from the existence of unwritten rules, such as:

- not knowing what unwritten rules exist
- not knowing if the unwritten rules you are familiar with will apply in a new or different situation, such as in a different culture or subculture
- not knowing how to resolve a conflict between explicit and unwritten rules.

Learning unwritten rules

The first thing to consider is, how do we learn unwritten rules?

There are a range of ways to learn about the unwritten rules of a particular culture or subculture. These include observation, imitation and making mistakes!

We learn some unwritten rules simply by observing and interpreting the behaviour of others, either in real life, or on television or in movies, books, and so on.

We learn some unwritten rules by imitating the behaviour of those we see around us. This usually results in either positive, negative or neutral feedback. For example, if you see several people queuing for a turn at something, you might guess that this is considered appropriate behaviour, and queue up yourself. What happens next will influence your future behaviour.

Sometimes, as in many areas of life, we learn by making mistakes. For example, as a small child, you

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might have picked your nose! You would have learned from the response of your parents, strangers, friends or siblings that this is unacceptable social behaviour. They might have communicated this by frowning or turning away, moving away from you, or withdrawing from a cuddle, by not smiling at you, or by saying 'Ewwwww!'

2 Ethics and unwritten rules

How do you decide what to do when you are aware of the unwritten rule, but it is in direct conflict with one or more explicit rules? This is a common ethical dilemma, especially for teenagers!

Consider, for example, the following dilemmas that result from a conflict between explicit and unwritten rules:

- You find your friend smoking in the school toilets. The school rules state specifically that smoking is not allowed. Your friend's parents have stated explicitly that your friend is not to smoke. But one of the unwritten rules of friendship is not to tell tales ...
- Your mum has bought a new dress to wear for a special dinner with your dad tonight. She tries it on and asks you what you think. The dress looks awful! Your parents have taught you explicitly that you should always tell the truth. You are aware that it is an unwritten rule that you should say something positive in response to your mum's question ...
- You and your family are going to visit your grandmother for Sunday lunch. Your grandmother has gone to a lot of trouble to cook a lamb roast, but you are a vegetarian. You know that one of the unwritten rules of your family is that you should eat whatever your grandmother prepares, but you don't want to eat meat for your own ethical reasons ...

Making a decison about what to do in these situations is a highly complex process. If you were in a situation like one of those described above, you would probably find yourself weighing up the relative importance of the various stakeholders' feelings, rights and responsibilities, including your own. This is what we do when we engage in ethical decision-making!

3 The road less travelled

While negotiating the conflict between explicit and unwritten rules may be a part of your daily life, learning about the explicit and unwritten rules of a new culture is more complex.

It may be clear how you can learn the explicit rules of a new culture, such as that of Indonesia. You can pay attention to signs, rulebooks, laws and so on, but how do you learn the unwritten rules?

You can use many of the same strategies you have used to learn the unwritten rules of teen culture or Australian culture in general: observe, imitate and learn from your mistakes.

If you know people from Indonesia, you can ask questions about what is acceptable and unacceptable social behaviour.

For example, did you know that in Indonesia, the left hand is considered unclean? It is therefore rude and offensive to hand someone something with your left hand, especially food or drink, or to shake hands with your left hand. If circumstances force you to hand something to someone with your left hand, it is best to say *Ma'af tangan kiri,* (Sorry for using my left hand') to acknowledge that you understand the cultural inappropriateness. A left-handed child in Indonesia is encouraged from an early age to use their

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tangan manis, (sweet hand) or their right hand to do everything.

In Indonesia, it is expected that you take off your footwear when entering a house, your own or someone else's, unless you are told otherwise. Your footwear is considered dirty (in the wet season some parts of Indonesia can be very muddy) and removing it is a sign of respect to the house owner. This probably originates in the requirement to take off your shoes when entering a mosque. If you are a girl and have the opportunity to enter a mosque, make sure you wear appropriate clothing: cover your hair with a scarf and wear something that is not too short or revealing. Although you may still be allowed to enter a mosque without a head cover or if you are wearing shorts, dressing appropriately shows respect for the place.

Don't be surprised if some people do not excuse themselves after burping in Indonesia. Most Indonesians do not consider burping impolite; on the contrary, it can indicate your appreciation of a good meal. If you feel uncomfortable burping during a meal without excusing yourself, but still want to show your appreciation, you can just compliment the cook by saying *Terima kasih, makanannya enak sekali,* (Thank you, the food is really delicious.)

Exercises

Exercise 1

Let's think a little more about unwritten rules in Australian culture.

1.1 What are some of the explicit rules in your family or community? Write down three that you can think of, and give details about how you learnt these rules.

For example:

In my family, everyone has to do their chores before dinner. I know this because my parents tell us, and they have a chores schedule on the fridge that details what we each need to do, and by when. Also, chores are a frequent topic of conversation at our regular family meetings.

Explicit rules: _____

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1.2 What are some of the unwritten rules of behaviour that most Australians follow? You might also like to consider any unwritten rules that are applied only in a community or social group to which you belong.

Unwritten rules:

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1.3 Are any of the unwritten rules you have identified in conflict with any explicit Australian rules? Give details of any conflicts you can identify.

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1.4 What values, attitudes or beliefs inform the unwritten rules you have identified in Exercise 1.2?

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Exercise 2

Now let's consider the unwritten rules of Indonesian culture. While answering these questions, it might help you to reflect on all of the things you have learned about Indonesian values, attitudes and beliefs in Stage 2 and so far in Stage 3.

2.1 What are some of the explicit rules of Indonesian social behaviour? Write down three that you can think of, and give details about where and how these rules are made explicit.

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2.2 What are some of the unwritten rules of behaviour that most Indonesian people follow? You might also like to consider any unwritten rules you are aware of that are applied only in a community or social group.

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2.3 Are any of the unwritten Indonesian rules you have identified in conflict with any explicit Indonesian rules? Give details of any conflicts you can identify.

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2.4 What Indonesian values, attitudes or beliefs inform the unwritten rules you have identified in Exercise 2.2?

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Exercise 3

In Exercises 1.2 and 2.2, you identified some of the unwritten rules for social behaviour in Australia and in Indonesia. In this exercise, you will be asked to consider the ethical dilemma of an Australian whose own culture's unwritten rules have come into conflict with those of Indonesia.

First, read the description of an ethical dilemma faced by an Australian visitor to Indonesia:

> Sandra is a 15-year-old girl. She is on holiday in Indonesia, and is unfamiliar with many of the unwritten rules for social behaviour. Nevertheless, she would like to be as polite and considerate as possible. She has been invited to a party at a local person's home and is trying to decide what to wear. She is aware of the unwritten rules about what a teenager should wear to a party in Australia, but is unsure of the unwritten rules about what a girl her age should wear to a party in Indonesia. She has a lovely, sparkly mini-dress, jeans and a shirt, and a more formal dress, similar to something she would wear to a dinner party with her parents if she was in Australia.

3.1 What unwritten rules are there in Indonesia that relate to what teenagers wear, particularly when going to a party? If you don't already know, how could you find out?

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3.2 Who, other than Sandra herself, will be affected by her decision about what to wear?

3.3 Now that you have familiarised yourself with some of the unwritten rules about what Sandra should wear to the party, help her think through her decision.

Write down Sandra's thought processes as she decides how to resolve her ethical dilemma about what to wear to the party.

In helping Sandra make her decision about what to wear, you should weigh up the relative importance and magnitude of various people's feelings, rights and responsibilities, including her own.

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