



Constructing Intercultural Dialogues

Case Study #6

The Privilege of Listening First

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Context

Five people sat around a table in a student union at a college campus in the western United States as part of a focus group participating in a research project about what it means to be a good listener within and across diverse cultures and differences. This particular group of individuals had each volunteered to participate in a discussion about what it means to be a good listener in a Deaf cultural context in which American Sign Language (ASL) was embraced as the primary means of communication.

Participants

At this table, there were five people that were part of the dialogue. One participant identified as culturally Deaf, using ASL as her primary means of communication and primarily identifying with the Deaf community. A second participant identified as deaf and oral, using a mix of ASL, Signed English, and spoken English in his communication. A third participant identified as hearing and as a spoken English and Spanish speaker, and a beginning ASL interpreter. A fourth participant identified as hearing and knowing little ASL but interested in being involved in the deaf community, having a much loved grandfather who was deaf but with whom she could not communicate with spoken English. I, as a fifth participant, identified as hearing and as an ASL interpreter, using a mix of ASL and English in my communication and facilitating the focus group discussion. The episode I describe below occurred roughly one hour into a 1.5 hour conversation.

Description

The purpose of the meeting was to discuss good listening within a Deaf cultural context in which a visual signed language was privileged as the primary means of communication. The participants had each shared how and when they felt listened to and the unique ways of listening in a deaf environment. For the culturally Deaf individual, listening meant paying attention with her eyes and participating in the lives of others through ASL. For the oral deaf individual, listening meant deciding at any given moment whether to



Constructing Intercultural Dialogues Case Study #6

use his cochlear implant, whether to engage hearing or deaf worlds through English or ASL. For the hearing individuals, their desire to be part of the Deaf community hinged on learning ASL and finding deaf people with whom to dialogue. Throughout this discussion, the two ASL interpreters took turns interpreting between ASL and English for the two members of the dialogue that could not access the other language.

Roughly one hour into the discussion, two conversations happened simultaneously between two sets of people. In one set, the communication was done entirely in spoken English. In the other set, entirely through signed ASL. Immediately following these brief episodes, the ASL-only and English-only participants looked to the interpreters to relay the content of the other conversation. Making eye contact with each other, a relatively long pause ensued during which an undiscussed decision was made about which conversation was interpreted first – the English conversation into ASL or the ASL conversation into English. The pause was broken by one of the interpreters interpreting the ASL conversation into English for the English-only participant. This was then followed by the English conversation being interpreted into ASL for the ASL-only participant.

Although it seemed a minute matter at the time, reflecting on this moment caused me to recognize that even in a space where ASL and Deaf culture was meant to be celebrated and privileged, the timing and order in which the conversations were relayed privileged a hearing and spoken language way of being over a deaf and signing one. Who had the privilege of listening first? The hearing person in spoken language.

Dialogic features

The intention by all participants was to be open to learning from and with the other members of the focus group about what good listening entailed and how we could all be better listeners. I believe this posture of learning and openness is the foundation for all good dialogue and makes it different from ordinary conversation because of the intentionality to create space for everyone to both speak and listen in mutuality.

It was a moment familiar to many who interact in Deaf cultural contexts – the use of multiple languages by people from multiple backgrounds. The intercultural dialogue worked because each person wanted to make sure that the others were included. They adopted each other's language whenever possible and invested the energy to both understand and be understood. This meant repeating in multiple languages. It meant double checking understanding and rephrasing when something was missed. It meant coordinating in the construction of the meaning created by all members of the focus group. This stance of openness, learning, and promotion of understanding through whatever means possible promotes positive intercultural dialogues.



Constructing Intercultural Dialogues Case Study #6

Lessons learned

Although dialogue was promoted throughout the process, it was done with varying equity for the participants. Improving our intercultural dialogue requires us to be attentive to the timing within those conversations. In this scenario, by asking the Deaf participant to wait for the hearing participant to get the information through a spoken language first, the group reinforced the privilege of both hearing people and spoken language by delaying communication access through signed language for the deaf conversation participants. The lesson I learned in this moment is that if we hope to construct better intercultural dialogues, we will need to be mindful not just to who speaks first, but who is offered the privilege of listening first as well.