



Constructing Intercultural Dialogues Case Study #4

“America the Beautiful”

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Context

I am a teacher of intercultural communication, and I find that the classroom is a space ripe with potential for dialogue. This particular episode that I describe took place in the classroom of my introductory undergraduate intercultural communication course. We were more than halfway through the semester and the class had established a pretty good rapport by now. On this day, we were engaging in a class activity aimed at discussing how popular culture can generate complex discussion on social justice matters. I was a little apprehensive because I was unsure about how the class discussion would flow.

Participants

As teachers, we know that every class is unique in its make-up. I had about 25 students in this section, and they were quite diverse in their ideological leanings and cultural backgrounds. This specific course is a core requirement for the university, drawing students from across various majors on campus. This usually makes for rich discussion on various topics, but there is always potential for disagreement and conflict. To help students engage dialogically with charged topics, I lay down some ground rules in my syllabus and address these on the first day of class. I make it clear that since everybody does not think the same way about everything, we need to engage in disagreements in ways that are dialogic rather than demeaning and dehumanizing to those with different viewpoints. I spend time discussing what this means and providing some examples.

Description

On this day, I showed the class an advertisement that had aired during the 2014 Superbowl and had generated some backlash. It was a [Coca Cola pro-diversity advertisement](#) in which “America the Beautiful” is sung in multiple languages. Multiples races, ethnicities, and religions provide visually compelling support to the song. The advertisement generated English-centric social media backlash from people who felt that the song had been denigrated, and comments devolved



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into xenophobia and anti-diversity sentiments. There was pushback against this backlash from pro-diversity groups, media and individuals. Our task through the activity was to decode this advertisement and analyze the dimensions of the controversy it generated.

One student (let's call her Mary), who had been particularly participative and had displayed progressive thinking in class so far, said something which surprised me. My own surprise reminded me how easily we put people into boxes. I had assumed she would be all in favor of "American the Beautiful" being sung in many languages and would applaud the beauty of such diversity. Instead, she asked why we need to push back against English and change this popular patriotic song. She said there are many ways to support diversity, ways that need not involve downgrading the language that is so central to identity in the United States.

In that moment, I had to figure out a dialogic move that would not silence her and yet get the point across that the U.S. has changed and that the colonial language that is dominant in this country is not central to everyone's identity. Despite being a woman of color and an immigrant to this country, I was also the teacher standing in a position of authority over this white female U.S.-American student. I decided that I would recruit the help of the entire class in navigating this situation, steering us in the direction of dialogue and eliciting complex viewpoints. So I tried an indirect approach to deflect the direct opposition between Mary and me by asking the rest of the class: "What do you think of Mary's question? Some of you may agree with her and some of you may not. Let's engage in this as a class and see where we can get." Mary looked away. Many viewpoints on ethnolinguistic diversity, patriotism and inclusion were shared; as a whole, the class seemed to agree that singing "America the Beautiful" in many languages is symbolically powerful and supports the point that diversity is beautiful. I was afraid Mary would stop coming to class or stop participating actively. But she did neither.

Dialogic features

One goal of dialogue is to reach an understanding across different viewpoints, although this does not necessarily mean reaching agreement or consensus. The challenge is to not fall into an "I'm right/You're wrong" pattern of talk. I did not directly tell Mary she was wrong at any point, and vice versa. Instead, we opened up ourselves to dialogue. Mary did not dig in her heels and nor did she obviously change her viewpoint during this episode. She was mature enough to continue participating for the rest of the semester and I affirmed her whenever I thought she



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made a good contribution. I wanted her to know that one disagreement did not make me change my mind about her as a complex person; I had seen the many other sides of her as well. I still don't know whether she ever changed her mind about "America the Beautiful" being sung in different languages. But I do know that we engaged in dialogue.

Lessons learned

Everyone does not agree on everything and never will, yet we still need to work together in complicated intercultural spaces and contexts. Recognizing that people cannot be simply put into fixed identity boxes enhances our ability to humanize the other as a complex human being and work dialogically through differing viewpoints. This ability, in turn, enhances our willingness to form alliances across complex cultural differences.