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Invitational Pedagogical Approaches to Sharing Examples of Witnessing in an Intercultural Communication Course

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Cover Page Footnote

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Invitational Pedagogical Approaches to Sharing Examples of Witnessing in an Intercultural Communication Course

Sharing stories of witnessing – which I define as the recalling of past emotionally fraught experiences – is a fundamental yet complex component to incorporate into the coursework of an intercultural communication course. In this essay, I explore ways that invitational pedagogy provides opportunities for students to openly share personal experiences of witnessing and create a collaborative dialogue on such topics in a face-to-face (F2F) intercultural communication classroom. Due to the sensitive, sometimes traumatic, and often controversial nature of witnessing topics, I advocate for an invitational pedagogy that promotes mutual understanding among students rather than trying to persuade and change viewpoints. For this commentary, I draw upon examples from my intercultural communication course wherein a collaborative dialogue is shaped by students sharing personal experiences of witnessing intercultural conflict(s) while their peers practice active listening in order to further understand the stories being told. At times, peers also offer differing viewpoints on why they believe the intercultural conflict may have arisen, providing additional perspectives that allow students to collectively contemplate the complexities of each instance of unethical communication in the story being told. In the sections that follow, my essay straddles providing commentary on the topic while also providing brief examples of utilized invitational pedagogical practices in a F2F classroom.

Defining Invitational Pedagogy

Developed by Foss and Griffin (1995), invitational rhetoric involves creating inclusive dialogue by extending an invitation to all participants to offer perspectives that encourage mutual understanding of a topic rather than seek persuasion. It is a model that emphasizes the ways in which each rhetor holds agency and self-determination, with all perspectives being valued during the communication in a welcoming environment. In the classroom, Griffin (2014) summarizes that an invitational speaker should “understand the issue fully; respect diverse views; appreciate the range of possible positions on an issue, even if those positions are quite different from your own; [and] engage in dialogue with your audience” (p. 241). To encourage respectful dialogue in the classroom, Hawk and Pokora (2020) add that students should practice invitational listening and language. Invitational listening includes when peers employ skills of active listening, such as paying close attention to the content and rate of speaking in their verbal and nonverbal responses. It also involves approaching their participation in a dialogue with an open mind and as a potential learning opportunity in which viewpoints can change. Invitational language includes utilizing inviting approaches when seeking clarification on a topic rather than attacking ideas. Hawk and Pokora cite Griffin’s (2009) recommendation to phrase questions with language such as “Can you elaborate on that idea?” and “What benefits do you see with that position?,” and when offering opinions, position the statements in the following arrangements, such as “Because of this experience, I began to see this issue as....” or “I came to this view because” (p. 353). In doing so, Hawk and Pokora emphasize that an invitational language in the classroom “invites others into the conversation rather than making absolute statements or speaking in a way that silences others” (p. 277). In what follows, I consider how instructors implement these principles of invitational pedagogy in a classroom when discussing personal experiences specifically related to intercultural conflict.

Using Invitational Pedagogical Strategies During Discussions of Stories on Witnessing

Oral Principles of Invitational Rhetoric in the Classroom

When sharing stories of witnessing, I find that maintaining broad topic options helps to create a more inclusive environment for classroom discussion. Providing students with broad options for discussion promotes an invitational pedagogy by allowing them to act as agents. Students can freely speak about experiences that they are willing to share with the class, as opposed to requiring them to focus on a specific type of intercultural experience or even asking them to regularly engage with intercultural conflicts being highly publicized in the news.¹ As I explain below, keeping the topic options broad creates opportunity for collaboration in mutual understanding of someone's experience rather than situating topics that might encourage pressured responses from students.

In my intercultural communication course, students tend to discuss interpersonal-based topics in which they have experienced or witnessed some type of intercultural bias or conflict with a family member(s), coworker(s), friend(s), roommate(s), community member(s), acquaintance(s), or stranger(s), etc. By explaining such interpersonal experiences, students apply key concepts in intercultural communication relating to the formation of biases, types of conflict and management styles, and ethical violations. Second, by students sharing personal stories of witnessing, other students can better understand those interpersonal experiences without trying to persuade others to think or act differently. For example, I have had several international students write or speak about being culturally discriminated against by roommates, other students, or professors in another classroom. I have also had students share a number of personal stories of witnessing when they felt discriminated against by a family member for expressing a cultural identity that does not align with the values of their family. At times, students have also shared personal stories of witnessing when they have demonstrated intercultural incompetence as the ethical violator in the conflict.

In each of these scenarios, students took turns telling their stories while the other students patiently listened to each account and then asked questions or provided comments of feedback or relatability. As the professor listening from afar to their discussions, I have never heard students try to persuade one another to think differently about the actions that occurred during the intercultural conflict. Rather, I've noticed three trends; first, I've heard students offer support to classmates that had experienced emotional discomfort in their example of witnessing. Second, I've heard group members offer diverse perspectives regarding why persons in the story may have acted in ways that demonstrated a lack of intercultural competence. Third, I've heard classmates collaborate with the student speaker to brainstorm how others' perceptions might have caused biases and ultimately led to the emergence of the conflict. Overall, allowing other students to offer additional perspectives about why the conflict may have arisen and evolved can aid in understanding any potential biases of persons involved in the conflict. In doing so, students can analyze how the main components of the intercultural communication process model are evident through their example and can better understand how biases are formed and interpreted in such conflicts.

¹ While intercultural-based news stories are relevant to include in class discussion, I encourage students to seek my approval and utilize them for their individual written or oral report given once throughout the semester.

In conclusion, I find invitational pedagogy to be effective when engaging students in conversations about experiences of witnessing. By students practicing active listening, asking questions, offering perspectives through an inviting language, and valuing each speaker as an agent with self-determination to freely speak, members of the classroom can effectively employ the central components of an invitational pedagogy. More specifically, an invitational pedagogy is paramount to fostering collaborative dialogue among students in courses that discuss topics on intercultural conflict.

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