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Creating Connection Through Intercultural Dialogue Partners

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Creating Connection Through Intercultural Dialogue Partners

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Context

The Intercultural Dialogue Partner (IDP) program has been a part of my Intercultural Communication course at two institutions across the last 8 years. While the program has evolved over time, the current version at a college campus in the western United States will be described. The IDP program is the service-learning component of an undergraduate course for about 30 mostly Communication majors. The primary goal of the course is for students to gain an appreciation of intercultural communication and to be able to engage in mindful dialogue across difference. My hope is that the class gives students the skills, knowledge, and opportunities to communicate across difference in ways that are transformative to each of them as a learner and a person. The motivation to initiate and then maintain the IDP program has been to give my students opportunities to enhance their own understanding of, and skill in, intercultural communication through the process of interacting with an Intercultural Dialogue Partner (IDP) and analyzing those interactions based on course concepts. Students get an interactive and meaningful educational opportunity while simultaneously meeting the community partners' needs for language practice and cultural connection.

Participants

While every course has different students, those in the Intercultural Communication course typically are predominantly white, monolingual, first generation in college, and from the west. Many students have grown up in ethnically and culturally homogenous areas, exposed to few cultural differences. The IDPs that partner with my students are students who identify as refugees, immigrants, and/or international students either attending the same university or a community college nearby. These students come from various countries of origin around the globe. Most speak multiple languages and English is not their first language. Their social class varies.



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Description

The 2017 IDP project paired 300-level students enrolled in my Intercultural Communication course with first-year students in two introductory English courses, both designed to develop English skills for multilingual students and taught by two different instructors. All three of us communicated regularly, initially to create some common readings and interview protocols, but later to coordinate logistics.

Once my students selected their partners based on information provided, they met as IDPs five times throughout the semester. Each pair decided jointly where and when they would meet; they were expected to meet for 30-60 minutes (although many met for much longer). Both the native and the non-native speaking students came to these meetings with interview questions we provided linked to course content, often loosely followed. For example, one question was “How do you think your cultural background has influenced who you are and/or how you see yourself in this context?” Students recorded their reflections on their IDPs’ answers electronically after each meeting and then compiled these into a final paper. Over time, questions and conversation moved from impersonal and a bit awkward to more personal, comfortable, and disclosive. The hope was for all of the students to not only gain a deeper understanding of their partners’ and their own personal biographies, but also for students to consider contextual situations and structures that affect them similarly and differently (Nagda & Maxwell, 2011) in order to foster empathy and build relationships.

Dialogic features

For my Communication students, the experience highlighted the importance of authentic dialogue and cultural awareness. It made course concepts visible, experienced and embodied in a way readings alone cannot. Students learned more about differential treatment related to power and privilege as well as the ways in which their own bias and identities are implicated in their interactions with others. One student stated in a final reflection, “We fought all discrimination toward each other and he was glad that I was able to understand him regardless of his accent and his African background.” Another student stated, “It has helped me see things from a new perspective. It has given me a greater appreciation for cultural differences in my life, and in the world.”

The English language students shared that this experience gave them the opportunity to be seen and heard in all their complexity versus through a lens clouded by stereotypes and a single story. Until their experience in the program, these students stated that they had never had a native English-speaking student sit down and truly listen to them. While they may have interacted with native speakers in other classes, they reported that the interactions were generally short and



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shallow. In some cases, the dialogues they engaged in led to friendship. IDPs cooked meals for one another, went hiking, invited each other to parties, watched movies, and celebrated Ramadan. One pair took a long road trip together during a holiday break. In reflecting on their time together, a student wrote, “both of us agreed that this experience was the most beneficial of the semester in any of our classes.”

Lessons learned

The dialogues worked because students were learning about others and themselves in a way that was supported by class material and the scaffolding of questions throughout the semester. It also helped that students were largely eager to learn from, and with, their IDPs. Because the partnership began after 5 weeks of course content and activity, my students were prepared to engage across difference in ways they had not previously. They saw the humanity of their partners and created memories and connections that lasted beyond the semester.

One challenge is the actual partnering process. It feels unfair that my students choose their IDPs versus both parties playing a role in the pairing. I would like to find a way for mutual matching without introducing unnecessary complications. On occasion, students who had a strong preference for a specific country of origin were late in choosing a partner and so ended up with someone from a country in which they had less interest. Over time, students were able to get over this initial preference and realize that the partnership was less for learning about a particular country and more about learning the unique human qualities and complexities of their partner (who would prefer not to be the spokesperson for their entire country). This expansion of assumptions occurred as a result of the rich dialogues in which they engaged.

It is a gift to teach a course that involves an experience in which lives are changed and students' fundamental understanding of a cultural Other shifts. As one student wrote with raw honesty, “Now I notice skin color or accent a lot more after this experience. Just meaning that I notice these different people, and I don't look through them like they are not there.”

Reference

Nagda, B. R., & Maxwell, K. E. (2011). Deepening the layers of understanding and connection. A critical dialogic approach to facilitating intergroup dialogues. In K. E. Maxwell, & B. A. Nagda (Eds.), *Facilitating intergroup dialogues: Bridging differences, catalyzing change* (pp. 1-22). Sterling, VA: Stylus.