

# Facilitating Intercultural Interaction: Reciprocal Knowing

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## First Year Inquiry (FYI) Course

The First Year Inquiry is a team-taught, multidisciplinary course designed to get students involved in the classroom, on campus, and in the community by addressing the question: **How Can One Person Make A Difference?** In the FYI course faculty support the learning and development of students' effective communication and appreciation of difference competence.

## Research Questions

What did students note about their diverse interactions through their personal experience assignment?

What did students find helpful or a challenge in doing and participating in the personal experience assignment?

## Methods

*Guiding Theoretical Framework:*

- **Anxiety/uncertainty theory of effective communication (AUM)**- (Gudykunst, 1993, 2005)
- **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**- (Ladson-Billings, 1998)

## Data

Students responded in writing to questions that were developed to capture their perceptions of their learning and development at two different time points in the semester.

- At mid-semester, students were asked to reflect upon their engagement and frustrations in the course.
- At the end of each semester, students were asked to reflect on a significant moment, event, or incident that occurred as a result of the FYI (fall) or LC (spring) course, describe it thoroughly, and explain why they selected it.

The reflection questions did not explicitly solicit students' perceptions of experiences with the personal experience assignment.

## Personal Experience Assignment: Student Voices

The personal experience assignments asks students to think of a personal experience or in some cases an object that reflects an aspect of their identity, experience, or values in relation to a topic of their course. These assignments teach traditional academic skills such as rhetorical awareness, acute, descriptive writing; constructing meaning and analysis; and oral communication. At the same time, it supports informal, intercultural interactions to develop rapport among students and establish the importance of respectfully listening to one another.

### Implementation of personal experience assignment in the FYI course

- Early in the semester, students are assigned a low-stakes writing assignment. They are asked to write about a personal experience or object that has significance or relevance to them and its connection to their identity, experience, or values.
- Students are then asked to do an oral presentation about the experience or object and its significance to the individual. Students can either read the narrative or more informally tell their classmates about the experience or object. Each student had two to three minutes to present.
- Faculty solicit feedback from the class about each students' presentation with the goal of facilitating active, critical listening.
- Teachers also present an experience or object so as to both model skills and participate in the assignment.

## RECIPROCAL KNOWING

**The process of crafting and sharing a personal narrative built a sense of knowing and being known, which students noted as critical in their initial formation of relations with peers whom they perceived as diverse.**

"Also, I greatly appreciate this event because it made me know my classmates better as a person. I do wish that at times all my classes created somewhat of a unit like this one because it helps build a bit of a relationship with everyone in the class, and the story behind the object gives a lot of information about one person, which I think that this help[ed] everyone to create a trust between one another."

### Listener- Narrator Pushing beyond assumptions

**Through the sharing of each other's stories, students are able to see each other as complex individuals, highlighting the importance of listening to and validating one another's experience. Listening to classmates' presentations, students report that they revised preconceived notions about their peers and challenged previously held stereotypes.**

"Indeed you cannot judge a book by its cover but, when no one is willing to approach one another you are left with nothing but to judge each other. The impressions I first had of my peers whom I did not approach or did not approach me changed. This presentation not only brought me closer to my family, culture, parents, and self but my classmates as well."

### Narrator- Listener Giving me their ears

**Students noted the importance of the instructor placing emphasis on the act of listening as a fundamental component of knowledge development and their ability to draw connections between lived experience, academic texts, and larger societal questions.**

"When I was reading my biographical assignment, I felt like the whole class was giving me their ears to hear my story. They could even remember my story and were able to respond about it."

"The whole time I had to pay attention since at the end we had to write about a few of the objects, but I'm glad that I had to. Learning about things important to other people made me feel as though now everyone can talk and get along better because we all shared something deep and personal about ourselves."

## Analysis

**The data analysis process involved two phases.**

- In the first phase, two researchers independently read 250 journal entries from the fall 2010 FYI sections that used a personal experience assignment in their course. We identified 101 journal entries in which students reflected on their personal experience assignment.
- In the second phase, we independently read 101 student journal reflections on the various personal experience assignments. Each researcher looked for emerging themes and subsequent discussions and coding process led to the identification of one major theme with two sub-themes.

## Conclusions

- Classrooms are spaces where intentional intercultural interactions can and need to be initiated and supported by faculty.
- Personal experience assignments provide students with meaningful opportunities to rehearse roles of interactions in a less anxiety provoking setting which can foster knowing across diverse peers and at the same time intercultural skill development.
- Students' intercultural competence is an on-going developmental process which can be further developed through multiple opportunities in various contexts in which participants interact across difference.