Facilitating Intercultural Interaction: Reciprocal Knowing

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Personal Experience Assignment: Student Voices

The personal experience assignments ask 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.

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 ongoing developmental process which can be further developed through multiple opportunities in various contexts in which participants interact across difference.