



Assessing Intercultural Competency – Part II

Guest post by Trudy Milburn

Hello.

(Hi)

What's your name?

(Response)

Where did you go to school?

If your student produced this as evidence of a cultural practice, how would it rate on this AAC&U Intercultural rubric criterion?

"Demonstrates sophisticated understanding of the complexity of elements important to members of another culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, or beliefs and practices."

At first blush, the interaction sequence might seem part of any typical introduction between two people who are meeting one another for the first time. Therefore, a student who produces this might appear to be “developing” on the low end of a graduated scale with a “target” level on the higher end. An instructor may evaluate the statement as evidence of a student’s initial awareness of an interactional pattern, but as lacking a nuanced understanding that its production may indicate a culturally significant pattern. However, perhaps there is more going on with this interactional sequence than one may initially assume.

If we heed Yep’s (2000) suggestion and consider both personal and broader social histories and how these intersect, we might re-consider the produced interaction from different subject positions. Consider these additional contextual features.

While traveling with students in Northern Ireland, we heard tour guides describe a greeting ritual that included the following parts: first asking, “What’s your name?” and then, “where did you go to school?” The guide explained that learning as much as you could about your interlocutors during introductions was very important throughout the tensest moments of the Conflict. It was considered vitally important to be able to quickly position a newcomer within an appropriate category, as Catholic or Protestant. Knowing relevant category could produce fear or solidarity. One guide described that he believed people with saint names were denied access to jobs.

Therefore, upon meeting someone, if one heard (or did not hear) a saint name, the follow up question was used to ascertain if the individual attended a Catholic School or not. It was this practice that led one to know on which side of the Conflict the new person was most likely to be. It may have also led to further discriminatory practices.

Coming back to the notion of assessing intercultural competence, how, then does one evaluate a student who attempts to demonstrate intercultural competence by producing such an interactional sequence? While the rubric criterion above includes many features that are valuable to consider, including the social, historical and political contexts of various communicative practices, it leads us into the same trap that Yep (2000) warns about, creating cultural “others.” Even if one notices the interaction sequence from the vantage points of the interlocutors who enact it, where does the student stand in relation to this sequence? One suggestion is that as instructors, we can help students to reflect on how noticeable practices might illustrate a belief within the student’s own culture. It may be that this interaction sequence may be so typical within one’s own culture as to initially go unnoticed. In fact, as instructors who are conducting intercultural assessment, perhaps we should consider our own potential biases towards such practices and consider how our cultural beliefs influence both how we instruct as well as how we assess intercultural competency.

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References

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