

On Being Heard Across the Table

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The communication lab consisted of a small group of first-year students who met every Friday with a facilitator to discuss issues about adjusting to campus life. This particular lab had students from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds, and at the first meeting they had decided to discuss cultural diversity throughout the semester. Last Friday, when the communication lab facilitator asked the group about how the week had gone, Maicee said, "I need to talk about what's happening in my English class. The instructor keeps calling me Chinese even though I'm Hmong. Actually the first day of class he didn't even call my name because I was the only Asian person in the class, so I guess he correlated my name on the roll to me. Then later in the class he asked me how I pronounced my name, and I pronounced it for him. He said it sounded Chinese. I felt unsure about him, and so I didn't bother to tell him that I'm not Chinese. But the following day I finally had to tell him that I'm not Chinese but Hmong. Then the next week when I made a class presentation, he said, 'Tze tzien,' which is Chinese for thank you. I just looked at him and didn't know what to say." Maicee looked nervous and distressed.

Todd, another member of the lab, looked at the group and felt really distanced from it. Maicee seemed to him like a nice person, but he knew that he probably wouldn't see her again after the labs and felt like he couldn't relate. He wished that the labs could talk about things that related to him more. He wanted to meet more people on campus who were doing things on the weekend that would be fun. He had thought about joining a fraternity or some clubs, but he didn't feel comfortable taking the first steps that would help him get involved in those things. And now again here was Maicee complaining about her English instructor. . .

She was saying, "You know, when instructors assume I'm from some Asian country besides Laos, I feel kind of embarrassed because I'm first of all put out in front of the class for a kind of display. Because while all this is going on between me and the instructor, the class is there watching. In these situations, whatever the instructor is saying just kind of goes through my mind, just goes through my ears and out the other side because I'm still thinking about the situation and so that interferes a lot with my paying attention in class. When I got home, I started . . . I felt belittled because I knew I couldn't do anything about it. I felt powerless and started to get depressed because, you know, I have to go back into that class the very next day. I live at home with my family, and they don't really understand college, so I can't really talk to them about this."

Lilly turned to Maicee and said, "Well, it's important that you feel comfortable enough to bring it up with us."

Maicee said, "Thanks. And when I went back, the professor put us in small groups, and I had a chance to be more verbal like I am in this smaller group, and he came by the group and commented that I spoke English very well. I should, you know, because I've lived here almost fifteen years, and I told him that politely. He said, 'Oh, then, you don't probably speak any Chinese.' So I had to tell him a second time, 'I'm not Chinese.'"

Todd looked around the room. He knew that he was supposed be interested in people from different cultures, but he just couldn't figure what the big deal was. What did it matter if his ancestors were German or Polish or Scandinavian? Who cared? He couldn't help thinking that Maicee was whining. Why couldn't she have just gone up to the guy after the first class and said to him, "Look, I'm Hmong from Laos; I'm not Chinese. This is real important to me." "Why should I have to spend time on a problem that has such an easy solution?" he thought to himself.

Several of the women in the lab were now commiserating with Maicee making it even worse. Becky was saying, "Gosh, I can't believe your instructor would continue to think that you're Chinese. No wonder you feel depressed." Jill responded, "Yeah, you must feel like nothing that you do can make a difference."

Todd started to think about the Iowa State game this weekend. He and his girlfriend had tickets. He needed to get some blankets and a thermos since the weather had turned cold. Sometimes he wished he had a group of buddies to go with, but his girlfriend liked football and didn't mind going with him. He hadn't really formed any friendships on campus, and lately he had realized that his buddies from high school hadn't been calling him anymore. Thinking about the game, he drifted back into the lab conversation. Maicee had been prompted by everybody's sympathy to go on about this English instructor. Clearly she was most bothered by what the instructor had done this last week.

Maicee was saying, "He asked me about my culture and stuff after class. He had either had a previous class or instruction or something on Chinese literature or writing, and so he started talking again about that, about Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching, and he recited a poem in Chinese and asked, 'Do you know that?' I didn't. He said, 'Well, you should, it's part of your history.' I felt so fed up because he wasn't listening to me. I don't know how to speak Chinese and learned all the Chinese history I know from high school. And throughout the whole interaction with him I was afraid that he would be offended by me always correcting him, especially in front of the class because he always corrected everyone. But yesterday he told me that my writing is too uptight, that I need to relax. He said that I didn't put enough feeling into my writing and that I didn't have a lot of power . . . uh . . . no, wait a minute; he didn't use the word power. He used the word constricted, that my writing is constricted. And then he said in front of the whole class, 'Why don't you relate what you write to your personal self and culture, you know, your Chinese culture?'"

Todd couldn't believe that the lab group was about still talking about this. Maicee had now taken fifteen minutes of lab time. How could any of this help him in college? He raised his hand and said, "I have a question about registration for next semester that I really have to have answered today before I go see my advisor. When do we get our humanities assignments?" Three other students needed to know this because they spontaneously said, "Yeah, who do we take?"

The lab facilitator responded, "I'll answer that in a minute. First, let's make sure that we have responded to Maicee and her situation and learned from it. What do think you would do, Todd, if you were in Maicee's situation?"

Todd said, "It just wouldn't be a problem for me. I would have gone up to the instructor after the first day of class and told him that I'm Hmong, not Chinese. I would have told him that many people make this mistake and that I'm sensitive about it. Why not just be direct?"

All the women in the lab gasped and said, "You don't understand how hard it is to be misunderstood all the time." Becky asked Maicee, "Well, why couldn't you just go to the professor like Todd is saying?"

Todd felt like they were ganging up on him. "Just cause I'm a male everybody thinks that I can do certain things that men are thought of being able to do, but they can't. All people have to stand up for themselves."

Maicee answered, "Well, in my culture we take the professor not so much as an equal but as an authority you must respect. We are trained to be very careful about what we say to our teachers because we hold them in high regard. Todd's treating the instructor more like an equal, and if I did that, the instructor might be offended because I am not his equal. And he has power over me, over my grade."

Todd said, "Well, since you've been in the United States for so long, can't you just adapt to the system and try to be more straightforward? I mean, at least the instructor knew something about Asians. I don't even know where Laos is."

Maicee said nothing. The silence grew heavy.

Jim finally said, "Hey, can we take the last ten minutes to talk about next semester's schedule?"

Several students started talking about the humanities class.

"Wait a minute," the facilitator said and then she asked, "Are you going to leave this discussion with Todd's solution as the last word? Maicee, how do feel about what Todd said?"

Maicee slowly responded, "I feel terrible that I can't be more assertive like he's saying. But I also feel terrible that I even brought this whole subject up."

Todd felt embarrassed but couldn't exactly say why. He just knew that he wanted the lab to be over.

Becky said, "Todd, do you understand anything that Maicee has said? Do you care about anything besides yourself and how you would respond? I mean, I thought that we had all agreed that diversity was important. Have you changed your mind?"

Todd looked at the group and his face turned red as he said, "Look, I'm struggling too. What happened to Maicee just happened to me in this lab. I've been misunderstood just like she was. What do you want me to do- just sit here and feel sorry for her?"

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