

Chapter 9

Dialogic Encounters: Voices for Change

ABSTRACT

Many narratives are built around communication patterns established early in life. Upon reaching college age, most students are well-versed in the intricate dynamics of relational interaction. Yet depending on upbringing, racial viewpoints, politics, etc., cultural diversity may add a complex and challenging layer to academic discourse. Martin Buber proposed that human beings use a unique form of dialogue, the “I Thou” encounter, to communicate and fully engage with others. The current chapter utilizes this dialogic exchange to enhance meaningful interactions about diversity in university settings. Initial encounters, classroom engagement, and community building are offered as venues for development in this area.

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INTRODUCTION

If you were to look at me, you probably would think I was raised in the United States but that is actually not true. I am what they call a “TCK,” which stands for Third Culture Kid, which basically means that my parents were of one culture but I grew up in another culture. I grew up in Quito, Ecuador and it was a great life there – the sports, athletics, and I had a wonderfully supportive community. But when I was eighteen, I came to the United States to pursue college. And when I made that transition, it was a very painful and very difficult experience. I just felt so out of place, and I hurt from the inside. I remember my dorm mate saying “I wish my parents would just leave me alone!” And I remember thinking “I just wish I could see my parents.” And the thing about coming to the US is that I had to make it work. I had to figure out a way to make this culture and me come together. ~Francis

What were your thoughts as you read this story? Did it take you back to something you had read or heard before? Francis, whose video narrative opens this chapter, experienced an extreme culture shock when moving to the United States. Although a member of the dominant culture, she went through a process of acculturation that would be foreign to most who shared her ethnic makeup. Instead of a migration journey, hers was more of a repatriation experience which for most TCKs includes “significant struggles with cultural differences, identity, and relationships” (Smith & Kearney, 2016, p. 958). Despite its foreignness, she had to survive in her new environment– all the while longing for the community in which she grew up. While reading, you may have experienced a mix of empathy and curiosity. Perhaps you wondered if she was able to bring the two cultures together in the end. (In a later part of her video, Francis said that she eventually moved to the United States, adding: “*I am an American, but when I first came here, I was very prejudiced against Americans, which was kind of interesting. But now I’m here and I love being here*”). Instead of delving further into her story, though, let’s look more closely at our capacity to engage with it.

In the early twentieth century, Martin Buber, an Austrian philosopher, developed the concept of the *I Thou* relationship, which exemplifies the ability of each human being to be deeply relational and contemplative during interactions with others (García, 2015). For Buber, all encounters represented precious connections worthy of utmost esteem. By contrast, in a typical coffee shop chat, we track what our friend says and measure emotional responses

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