

Comments from the Editors

In this issue Mark Peterson has organized discussions of a cross-cultural class exercise controversy that occurred in the USA last year.

Guest Editor's Comments: Stepping on Cultural and Religious Assumptions

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THE SPRING OF 2013 found Florida Atlantic University (FAU) embroiled in a national controversy about a "Step on Jesus" exercise, a controversy that has implications for our assumptions when we do intercultural training. My purpose in introducing the present special issue about intercultural training that challenges cultural and religious assumptions is to first describe the controversy and my role in it, and then to identify three issues that it raises — the depth of training interventions, self-disclosure of hidden identities and voluntarism and consent. The first essay provides my own reflections about these issues. The other three essays are by colleagues who provide deeper analyses of these three issues.

The Event and Its Context

The "Step on Jesus" exercise is rarely controversial. It is one of many training tools that are designed to help students become aware of their unconscious assumptions about symbols and how they differ from the assumptions of others. The instructions read: "This exercise is a bit sensitive, but really drives home the point that even though symbols are arbitrary, they take on very strong and emotional meanings. Have the students write the name JESUS in big letters on a piece of paper. Ask the students to stand up and put the paper on the floor in front of them with the name facing up. Ask the students to think about it for a moment. After a brief period of silence, instruct them to step on the paper. Most will hesitate. Ask why they can't step on the paper. Discuss the importance of symbols in culture" (Neuliep, 2011).

When the exercise was used in one class at FAU, one student suggested to the news media that the exercise showed anti-Christian bigotry. The university received several thousand e-mails, most of which supported the student's view. The student's objections generated national media attention. Florida Governor Rick Scott and Florida Senator Marco Rubio expressed outrage about the exercise. FAU's President and Provost resigned as controversy raged about how this and several earlier issues had been handled.

As a senior cross-cultural management professor at FAU, I was invited by my business faculty colleagues to join a faculty committee to consider how the university had reacted. Other faculty and administrative groups dealt with what happened in the class session and how the university should act toward the instructor and student who were involved. To gain perspective on what I should do as a committee member, I asked for advice from several dozen colleagues throughout the world who do culture-related research and training. The present special issue does not deal with the particulars of this one case, but instead addresses basic issues that the situation raises for intercultural training.

Essays about Depth, Disclosure and Consent

My own essay suggests that we should think of ourselves not only as individual culture trainers but also as a commu-



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nity, and we should also think of our students both as individuals and as points of contact with larger cultural communities. As individual cultural trainers, we should reflect on our personal assumptions about why and how we challenge our students' most basic self-schemas and social identities. As a community of cultural scholars, we also should reconsider our professional norms. Are some of our own norms just as parochial and ethnocentric as those of many students? Our norms may sometimes direct us to unnecessarily stigmatize our students' cultural backgrounds and trigger undesirable, but predictable, responses from their cultural communities.

An essay by Martha Maznevski considers *how deeply* intercultural training probes into students' most basic social identity and self-image. She draws from literature about identity and self-image and from her long intercultural training experience, currently as a professor with the International Institute for Management Development (IMD) in Lausanne. Much of her discussion is about how a trainer can gradually build trust to provide a supportive context for deep self-awareness and questioning of one's assumptions. She addresses my concern that trainers should take care about intervening too deeply by providing a training process view. Rather than explaining how a trainer can anticipate what "too deep" might mean in advance, she explains how to judge when training touches on areas that their students are not prepared to consider and how to adjust training at such points.

Brent Lyons follows by using research about *identity management and disclosure* of religious identity in the workplace to carefully consider when such disclosure does and when it does not have constructive consequences. His essay addresses my concern about whether either we as trainers or our participants fully understand the potentially permanent implications of revealing hidden identities for themselves and their communities. His thoughts are informed by his own recent research about disclosure of Christian identity in the United States and Korea.

Finally, David Herst speaks to the problem of *consent* from a human resources and legal perspective. He considers whether norms about informed consent followed for medical procedures and research projects in the United States can be adapted to intercultural training. He does so using five issues raised in the medical and research ethics literatures: voluntarism, capacity, disclosure, understanding, decision.

These essays are intended to promote the same sort of reflection about our professional norms for training that we want to see our students show when reflecting on their own cultural assumptions. Has our assumption about the arbitrary quality of all symbols become so firmly taken for granted as self-evident truth that culture groups which take exception to this assumption generate more emotion than reflective thought on our part? Are we willing and able to work with students-in-cultural-communities who want to use our insights to help them engage in effective intercultural relations, or do we really want to change their social identity or their cultural community? Are we willing and able to do so without challenging the most basic schemas around which students' sense of self is organized and the social identities that shape their closest personal relationships, or without trying to change their cultural community? It is toward that sort reflection about our own personal views and professional norms in intercultural training that this special issue is offered.

References

Neuliep, J. P. 2011. *Intercultural communication: A contextual approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.