

A Case Study of Sorrell's Intercultural Praxis Model:

At a predominantly white land grant university in the Midwest, students from a range of departments and majors attended an event on environmental justice as a course requirement. The day after, students in a General Education Science course meet in their assigned discussion group. The instructor asks them to share their impressions of the event and any questions they may have.

Jason, a white student who grew up in a nearby rural farming community, says "I thought it was interesting, I guess. But nobody there talked about the farmers' perspective. It was all about how we need to protect the environment and address climate change, or we're doomed. What about the farmer who's just trying to make a living? And what about all the people who depend on the food those farmers produce?"

"Yeah, right, and is climate change even real? I mean it's normal to have changes in the weather. Hot and cold cycles have happened throughout history, right? And scientists don't even agree on whether or not humans are causing shifts," adds Steven, another white student from Indianapolis.

After a long pause, Imani, an international student from Kenya, responds emotionally, "Even before the pandemic, over a million people in my country were on the brink of starvation due to climate change. I mean, it's real...climate change."

Roger, a Black student from Atlanta, crosses his arms and sighs, "Climate change may be real, sure. But it's hard for me to care much about it when we're dying over here every day at the hands of the police."

Another silence and then, Amanda, a white student from Chicago jumps in with, "Oh, come on, Steven, really? How can you not believe in climate change? Weren't you listening yesterday when they said something like 97 or 98% of all scientists acknowledge climate change is a major problem? Plus, feminists have been pointing out for decades the connection between destruction of the environment and male-dominated societies," which sparks a couple of groans from others in the class.

Trying to ease the rising tensions, Seema, an international student from India, says "Did anybody else notice how everything at the event was focused on the U.S.? Environmental justice is a global issue. It's the same with the global pandemic. Until everyone has access to vaccines, none of us is safe. But it seems sometimes like all people care about here is local impact."

"Well, it makes sense to me it was all about the U.S. You're in the U.S.," Jason responds.

Sean, a Black student from Flint, Michigan adds, "You all know about the water problem in Flint. Well, you know about it now, but we were being poisoned for a long time before anyone paid any attention. And why? Just because they wanted to cut corners, save money, and figured we didn't matter."

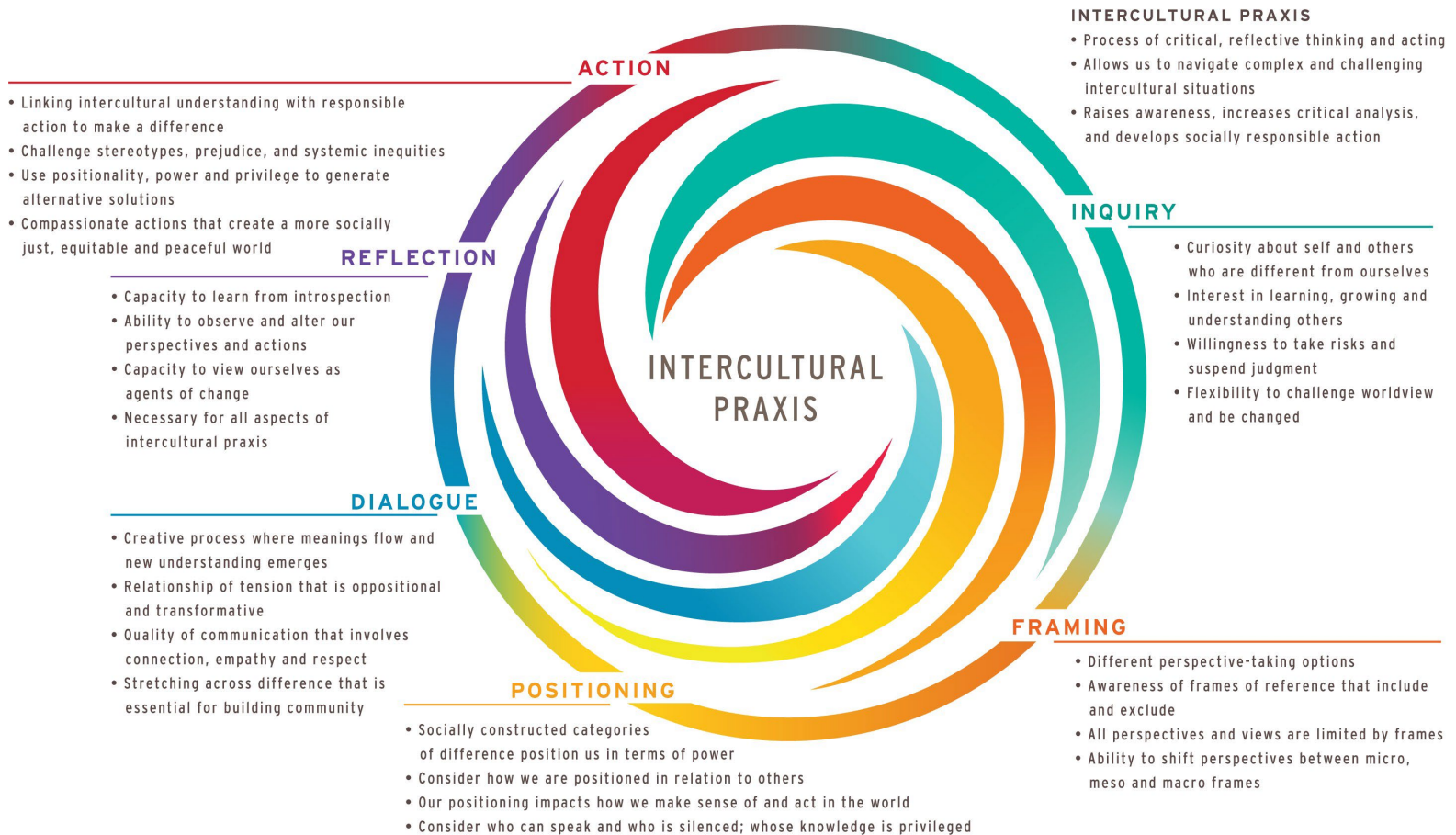
Jessica, a Hispanic student from Minneapolis contributes, "Flint is definitely an example of environmental racism like what's happening with the pipeline in northern Minnesota. My family loves the boundary waters in Minnesota. We go there every summer for vacation. This summer, I'm thinking about joining the protest with the water protectors led by Indigenous women who are

trying to stop the pipeline.”

Steven responds, “Like Jason said, though, how are the farmers going to make a living? How do we get enough fossil fuels to live a normal life? We can’t protect every piece of land, every water supply, every community in the whole world...something has to give. Some places get hit worse than others. That’s just the way it is.”

Uncomfortable with the growing divisiveness, the instructor changes the topic to the assignment due at the end of the week.

INTERCULTURAL PRAXIS MODEL KATHRYN SORRELLS, PH.D.



INFOGRAPHIC BY JESSICA ARANA

Using the model as a process map, consider the case study from each “entry point” into the process, for example, “Inquiry” and “Positioning”. Take the time to think through a response to each question posed as you read.

Inquiry:

In this scenario, what or who are you curious about? If you were part of this discussion group, how would you go about finding out what you want to know or acting on your curiosity? What are some of the different methods of inquiry? For example, some cultures like the dominant European American or white culture in the U.S. tend to ask direct questions as the central form of inquiry. Some other cultures depend more on observation as a way to inquire and find direct questions to be disrespectful. Asking questions (direct or indirect), engaging in observation, doing research, or engaging with people from the culture you want to know more about are all forms of inquiry.

When someone makes a statement you disagree with, is your tendency to argue against it, dismiss the person in some way, or ignore the comment? Often those responses only entrench people even more deeply in their position. What if you were able to suspend judgment – in other words, hold back on your criticism and ask questions about the other point of view? What if you were to try to understand why the other person thinks the way they do about this issue?

Inquiring about and trying to understand the emotional aspects of an issue are very important. We imagine we are rationale beings acting and thinking the way we do based on logical thinking. However, emotions such as anger, sadness, and fear; as well as the need to be seen as fully human, to belong, and to be respected motivate much of our behavior and thinking regarding controversial and divisive issues. Could you say: It seems like you feel very strongly about this, can you help me understand why?

In this case study, which participants in the conversation do you think exhibit the most curiosity about other perspectives? What would YOU like to know more about or better understand?

Framing:

Where we grow up, the people around us, the activities we engage in and the experiences we have all impact our cultural frames. Our gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, religion, education, and nationality, among other things, all intersect to shape our cultural frames. Clearly, the students have differing perspectives on climate change and environmental justice. In what ways might their cultural backgrounds frame or shape their perspectives on this issue?

Framing in the Intercultural Praxis Model also refers to an ability to shift our perspective or point of view from the micro level, which is what is happening right now on the interpersonal level, to the meso, intermediate, or group-based level and then also to the macro or broader global level. The case study describes a micro-level or interpersonal interaction, but there is more going on in the discussion of environmental justice than what is happening in the moment.

The meso-level refers to the group-level or our belonging within groups, which could be based on geographic region, urban vs. rural, race or ethnicity, gender, class, religion, or nationality. Our belongingness gives us a sense of identity, along with a group-based history and establishes in-groups vs. out-groups. While the case study describes an interpersonal discussion in a particular place and time, the meso-level of group-based identities, belonging, and cultural histories is also present and impacts the situation. The students draw on examples from their group-based life experiences—living in a farming community, living through famine in one's country of origin, experiencing environmental racism in Flint, and being targeted as people of color by police

brutality. These inform their cultural frames and their differing positionalities.

The macro-level refers to the larger issues such as economic, political, and geopolitical power imbalances as well as the role of media and representation in shaping what we think about each other—from our neighbors to people from countries around the world. How might these micro, meso, and macro cultural frames limit perspectives in the case study? How would you recommend broadening frames or gaining the ability to shift among perspectives?

Positioning:

Positioning in the Intercultural Praxis Model requires that we interrogate relationships of power interpersonally, institutionally, and systemically. This means we must consider our positionality—how we are positioned in terms of power based on socially constructed categories of difference such as race/ethnicity, gender, socio-economic class, language, religion, nationality, and documentation status among others. While the students are all in the same classroom at the same university, are they positioned identically in terms of hierarchy or status at the university? How are students of color positioned in terms of power at a pre-dominantly white university? In addition to being in a clear numeric minority, what other factors impact how students of color are positioned at the university? How does this positioning feel? What about international students? What factors contribute to their positioning, and how does that positioning feel? Upon arriving in the U.S., what is the experience of international students as their positionalities shift, for example from majority to minority group members? How are white students positioned at the university? How does socio-economic class, rural/urban background, and/or religion impact positionality? How about white students who are the first in their family to go to college?

Once you are aware of your positionality, how can you leverage it or use it to shift perspectives, challenge stereotypes or discrimination, and create inclusion and access? Are there students in the case study who illustrate this?

Dialogue:

What are your observations and reflections about the dialogue described in the case study? Dialogue can be oppositional; in other words, it does not mean you have to agree. Dialogue can also be transformative if you are willing to stay engaged even when or especially when the interaction becomes difficult, heated, and challenging.

Dialogue offers a critical point of entry into intercultural praxis. By being aware of differences in cultural frames and positionalities as well as the tensions that emerge from these differences, the process of dialogue invites us to stretch ourselves—to reach across difference. We are then able to imagine, experience, and creatively engage with points of view, ways of thinking and being, and beliefs different from our own while accepting that we may not fully understand or come to a common agreement or position.

How would you re-write the case study to illustrate the process of dialogue as described here? Think about a situation you have been in recently where differences of opinion or perspective were voices leading to tension or conflict? What strategies, knowledge, or behaviors have you gained from the intercultural praxis process that would support a more productive, inclusive, and transformative outcome?

Reflection:

The capacity to learn from introspection is shared by all humans, but cultures around the world differ in how much they value reflection and the ways in which they practice reflection. Many cultures, including the dominant culture of the United States, place a high value on doing activities and accomplishing tasks, which often leaves little space and time for reflection. However, reflection is a key feature of intercultural praxis. Reflection helps you observe yourself in relation to others, to alter your perspectives and actions, and to transfer knowledge and skills from your experiences to other contexts.

How reflective are you, usually? Do you think about your habitual behaviors? Your assumptions about other people, or their assumptions about you? How could reflection help you be more successful in your interactions and satisfied with your relationships?

Take a moment to pause and reflect now. How were you feeling when you read the case study? Which perspectives resonated most with your experiences and values? So far, which aspects of the Intercultural Praxis model have been most useful in understanding the complexity of the situation? What has made you most uncomfortable?

Action:

Each one of us takes multiple and varied actions individually and collectively that have intercultural communication dimensions and implications every single day of our lives from how and who we engage with, who we make friends with, what classes we take, what we do with our free time, and what media we consume. What actions did individuals in the case study take to challenge stereotypes, prejudices, and systemic inequities? What behaviors seemed to escalate the conflict? What suggestions or advice do you have for the students to engage more productively in their discussion? How could the students, individually or collectively, use their positionality to generate alternative solutions? For example, a false dichotomy—environmental justice vs. profit—was created by the way some of the students discussed the issues. Is there an alternative, where environmentally just practices and products generate profit?

Imagine yourself inside this case study. What would it mean to you to think of yourself as an agent of change? How can you leverage your positionality to enable greater access, inclusion and belonging in your classroom, on campus and beyond? How could you use your power, positionality, and privilege individually and collectively to create a more just and equitable world?