Is Cultural Competence Only a Classroom Project?

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During the last decade, unprecedented advancements in communication and transportation technologies have made it possible to bring the world much closer than ever before. This burgeoning phenomenon, commonly referred to as "globalization", may be compared, in impact, to the industrial revolution of the late 18th century, where subsistent living was supplanted by a rising mechanization. Small English farmers and artisans, for example, were forced to give up the insularity of their small holdings as they could no longer compete with an economy of scale ushered in by factory production. Although nineteenth century England became the most powerful nation on the face of the earth as a result of its industrial wealth, the English were faced with new social ills. The emergence of a new working class led to overcrowded cities, unemployment, pollution, child labor, prostitution, disease, and increased poverty.

Today, our technological advancements have made it possible for one to interact instantly with others around the world (via internet, interactive video, telephone, and etc), traverse the continents in a matter of hours, or even take classes and earn a degree without leaving home. These transformative changes have conquered huge physical boundaries, once seen as permanent colossal divides, making possible the construct of a "global village" to come alive. Although the borders of space and place have been shattered, we are yet to transgress the cultural, racial and ethnic divides that foil our efforts to attain a common humanity. These boundaries of mind—these ubiquitous human obstacles—constitute the last frontier of our journey to the "global village".

As more and more people of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds live and work together, colleges and Universities have introduced into the

curricula cultural competencies (i.e., cues enabling students to be sensitive to and respectful of otherness—cultures and values that are different). The introduction of a "cultural competence" discourse into the professions and the academy, therefore, is an attempt to foster effective cross-cultural practices. So, the term "cultural competence" is most frequently used to denote the procurement and use of those skills that make us cross-culturally literate. In effect, cross-cultural literacy prepares us to serve as agency for disambiguating, understanding, and appreciating the nuances of others' cultures and values.

While much progress has been made in the classroom towards the advancement of a "cultural competence" discourse, it seems obvious that our own individual and collective cultural eccentricities continue to hinder a linear progression in this direction. Counter to the "cultural competence" pedagogy, the global society is still riddled with a pre-21st century consciousness of the world as hierarchically stratified. One will not soon forget August 29, 2005 when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, shattering everything in its path and leaving parts of the city under an ocean of water. On one occasion, as the events of that tragedy were being covered on television, a reporter from a major TV network observed that the disaster was unlike anything ever seen on the American landscape, because, as he observed, the city had been totally reduced to the likes of a "third world" country. Although the "third world" metaphorical reference may have gone unnoticed, it is subliminally rooted in our consciousness as a mired pictorial model for understanding those countries pejoratively labeled as "third world" or "global south". One is not, in any way, suggesting that the reporter's reference was malicious or even conscious. Instead, the point being made is that there are silent semiotic codes embedded in our communication and thought processes that run counter to the ideals of a "cultural competence" discourse. The reporter's comment conjures up an image of a hierarchical cosmos that is numerically numbered, with third being likened to the worst circle of Dante's *Inferno*.

The promulgation of terms such as "third world" or "global south" to connote as substandard those parts of the world considered

"underdeveloped" or still "developing" (South America, Africa, South Asia and Oceana), as well as their cultures and their values, by association, makes it difficult to put into practice the rhetoric of "cultural competence". The term "third world" was first used by French Economist Alfred Sauvy, who compared the poor countries of the "global south" to the third estate (Tiers monde) of Feudal France (*L'Observateur*, August 14, 1952). The third estate or third class, comprising disenfranchised workers, was at the bottom of the French economic and social scale, while the first estate, comprising rich and powerful aristocrats and clergies, was at the top of the scale. Sauvy's comparison, which was intended as a critique, has been unabashedly used as a label that is laden with a load of denigration and distortion.

Such negative labeling of others (i.e., their cultures, homelands and values) infiltrates our popular culture and sabotages the strong efforts that are being made to promote "cultural competence". Here is an example: On November 14, 2008, an Australian Cricket star, Matthew Hayden, made a comment about the poor ground conditions of "third world" countries, as a factor for his team's loss to India. (www.expressindia.com/latestnews). These kinds of comments often go unnoticed, and they tend to create a subtext that permeates and negates the "cultural competence" dialogue, In effect, the practice of "cultural competence" is often reduced to mere acts of pacification. Labels like 'third world" and "first world" create hierarchical systems or social stratifications that permanently maintain boundaries which, in the end, stunt genuine efforts to advance cultural-conversations. "Cultural competence" requires interlocutors to see each other's culture and values as different yet equally respectable. And, there are many, many people who excel in cross cultural understanding. Without this kind of conscious mutuality, "cultural competence" will remain a nebulous rhetoric in classrooms that fails to gain meaningful application in lived spaces.