Intercultural Engagement Resources and Concepts from the Dean of Students Office

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The purpose of this section is to introduce faculty to the Cultural Orientations model and Intergroup Dialogue guidelines that many Yale-NUS students are familiar with as a result of development programming run by the Dean of Students office during orientation and in specialized workshops on intercultural engagement. Sharing a common vocabulary and framework for thinking about cultural diversity at Yale-NUS can help faculty engage in conversations with their students about cultures and backgrounds, as well as mediate cultural differences in the classroom.

Intercultural vs. Multicultural

Students are introduced to the difference between “multicultural” and “intercultural” as terms and concepts. While multicultural refers to the existence of different cultural groups alongside each other within a community, intercultural suggests greater interaction between these different groups. An intercultural community is one where there is engagement between various identities and the exchange of ideas and norms to develop healthy relationships. An intercultural community should find itself constantly engaging with different cultural practices and ways of seeing the world.

Cultural Iceberg

The Cultural Iceberg is introduced to students as a way to think about the complexities of culture and to communicate to students that there is more to culture than what meets the eye. Students are provided with an image of an iceberg and introduced to the notion of surface and deep culture. The Cultural Iceberg draws attention to the fact that culture is complex, and comprises both easily perceptible aspects of culture like food, art and language, as well as deeper aspects that may not be immediately obvious to someone who is new to the culture. Introducing this concept encourages students to think about what may not be immediately visible to them in their interactions across different cultures and therefore recognise the complexity of understanding or assimilating into a culture that may be different from what they are used to.

Figure 4: Cultural Iceberg

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Cultural Orientations Model

At Yale-NUS, students are introduced to the Cultural Orientations Model, a framework for thinking about one’s culture that is commonly used by organizations to navigate cultural differences in increasingly diverse environments. This model attempts to move away from both a “state-oriented paradigm” of understanding culture, which tends to classify specific cultural preferences or habits as superior or inferior and a “traits-oriented paradigm” of understanding culture, which compares cultures across boundaries such as nationality to reify them as groups that objectively display specific traits. Both these paradigms tend to strip culture of its dynamism, encourage ethnocentricity and risk creating a sense of cultural superiority.

The Cultural Orientations Model instead uses a “Process-Oriented Paradigm,” which frames culture as a dynamic social process by which “individuals and groups are seen as forming and negotiating notions and ideas of each other as well as of the nature of perceived reality in the course of their interactions.” Ideally, such an approach to culture would result in interventions that focus on negotiating between styles, developing awareness about the cultural preferences of the self and others, and ultimately creating a cohesive new culture unique to the environment.

The model introduces three dimensions of culture: Thinking Style, Sense of Self, and Interaction Style.

Figure 5: The Cultural Orientations Model

The Thinking Style Dimension

This is related to how we process information, create meaning, perceive, reason and reference.

The Sense of Self Dimension

This dimension is closely related to one’s values, and to how one experiences the world. It also closely relates to how emotions shape our identity, base motivation, sense of agency, and other aspects of the self.

The Interaction Style Dimension

This is often framed as the “tip of the cultural iceberg,” or what we most immediately perceive in others. It is the meeting of the internal world of the self and the external world, exhibited in behavioural display. Examples of this will be discussed below.

These dimensions of culture are further split into 10 dimensions and 19 sub-dimensions of culture as shown in the diagram and table below.

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3 Schmitz, Tarter, and Sine, “Understanding the Cultural Orientations Approach.”

4 Schmitz, Tarter, and Sine, “Understanding the Cultural Orientations Approach.”
Students are then given opportunities to rate and discuss their cultural preferences. Students are provided with a scale such as the one shown on the next page and asked to indicate where they lie on a spectrum of preferences. This activity gives students a better grasp of their own preferences in various dimensions of culture and also helps them understand how others may have different preferences and how behaviours can be modified and dialogues can be had to negotiate these differences. Providing students a shared vocabulary for preferences also empowers them to have conversations amongst themselves about how they think, interact and constitute their sense of self throughout the rest of their time in college.

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Diversity & Inclusion in Curriculum and Classroom – Online Appendix
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Figure 7: Interaction Style Spectrum

Significance in the Classroom Context

These differences become very salient in classroom interactions. For example, imagine two people engaged in an active discussion or even disagreement about interpreting a text. If one operates from a more direct and the other from a more indirect communication style, the direct person might unintentionally come across as bullying, whereas the indirect communicator might inadvertently convey a lack of confidence in their ideas. In fact, the direct-style and indirect-style students might be equally open to new ideas and equally convinced of their own opinions, but their presentation will vary in ways that could breed misinterpretation, resentment, and stifle their ability to learn from each other. These issues also become salient when professors operate in a very different style from many students. For example, faculty members who embody a very low-context communication style, where information is communicated very explicitly in words and tone, may have difficulty understanding the more subtle communication signals of students who use a high-context communication style where much is conveyed outside of words and language.

Discussion, Debate and Dialogue

To enable students to have an effective dialogue amongst themselves, even in light of disagreements, students are introduced to the differences between discussion, debate and dialogue, and when each mode of interaction may be appropriate. These differences are highlighted in the table below:

Table 2: Discussion, Debate, and Dialogue

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In DISCUSSION, we try to…</th>
<th>In DEBATE, we try to…</th>
<th>In DIALOGUE, we try to…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Present ideas</td>
<td>Succeed or win</td>
<td>Broaden our own perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seek answers and solutions</td>
<td>Look for weakness</td>
<td>Look for shared meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuade others</td>
<td>Stress disagreement</td>
<td>Find places of agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enlist others</td>
<td>Defend our opinion</td>
<td>Express paradox and ambiguity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share information</td>
<td>Focus on ‘right’ and ‘wrong’</td>
<td>Bring out areas of ambivalence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solve our own and others’ problems</td>
<td>Advocate one perspective or opinion</td>
<td>Allow for and invite differences of opinion and experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ask questions and Invite Inquiry</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7 Adapted from Schmitz, Tarter, and Sine, “Understanding the Cultural Orientations Approach.”
Students are also given a series of questions to ask themselves if they have trouble participating in dialogue, which the Yale-NUS Dean of Students Office proposes as a valuable mode of interaction for conflict mediation and engaging with intercultural issues. These questions are below:

1. Am I honouring my own experience as valid… OR am I feeling defensive about it?
2. Can I trust others to respect differences… OR do I suspect others are trying to force me to change?
3. Can I trust myself to be permeable and still maintain integrity… OR do I fear that really hearing a different perspective will weaken my position?
4. Am I willing to open myself to the pain of others (and my own pain)… OR am I resisting pain that I really do have the strength to face?

Intergroup Dialogue (Post-Orientation Programming)

Aside from Orientation, students learn more about navigating diversity and identity at Yale-NUS through other programmes organized by the Dean of Students office. One hallmark program worth highlighting is Intergroup Dialogue (IGD). Intergroup Dialogue is a face-to-face, curriculum-based, and facilitated conversation between members of different social identity groups, to encourage student participants to explore singular and intersecting aspects of their identities while critically examining dynamics of power, privilege, diversity and inequity in society, as well as building skills for commitment to social responsibility and action.

IGD is structured as an intensive 8-week course for up to 16 participants and consists of: small group and large group facilitated discussions on one identity; personal sharing; readings; journaling; and one on one sessions with facilitators. That said, learning in intergroup dialogue mainly happens through personal sharing and growth in self-awareness.

During IGD, all participants agree upon guidelines for dialogue. The guidelines, which may be useful for faculty as they engage in similar dialogues in their classes or other settings, are listed below (Prepared by Ashlee Consulting LLC, All Rights Reserved 2015):

**Guidelines for Dialogue**

- We all recognize that everyone who is here today wants to be here. This is a challenge by choice dialogue, to engage at the level where you feel comfortable.
- We all agree to do our best to make this a brave space to talk openly and honestly about subjects that might be uncomfortable.
- We all agree to listen respectfully to one another in the spirit of understanding.
- We agree to suspend judgment, of ourselves and others. Along these lines, we agree to assume positive intent.
• We all agree that we aren’t looking for “right answers.” Instead, we hope to have a meaningful
dialogue. We are not trying to figure it all out in this short time. In fact, we may leave with more
questions than answers.
• We will not demean, devalue, or “put down” people for their experiences, lack of experiences, or
difference in interpretation of those experiences.
• Challenge the idea and not the person. If we wish to challenge something that has been said, we will
challenge the idea or the practice referred to, not the individual sharing this idea or practice.
• Speak your discomfort. If something is bothering you, please share this with the group. Often our
emotional reactions to this process offer the most valuable learning opportunities.
• We assume confidentiality. Although it is okay (and encouraged) to talk about what is said tonight
and the issues that come up, we all agree not to use names or other identifying information when we
talk about it.
• We all agree to use “I Statements.” Each person speaking for their own lived experience, not for anyone
else or for an entire group of people.
• We all recognize the importance of stepping up and stepping back - sharing time equally.

Conclusion and Implications for the Classroom

For faculty who wish to create a learning atmosphere of dialogue, rather than of debate, you now know some
of the tools your students have already been given for dialogical communication. For some subjects, topics, or
exercises, a dialogue-based approach might prove distinctly useful for student learning. This is something
faculty may wish to experiment with especially when sensitive issues may arise. On the other hand, the debate
may be a preferred method for generating new ideas or inculcating some discipline-appropriate
communication skills. Even if you favour a more discussion or debate-style classroom, however, it can be useful
to be explicit about your preferred communication styles with students, and set expectations up front for what
that means. Students may never have engaged in active discussion or debate in an academic, or any, context
previously. This is especially the case for students who come from cultures characterized by more indirect
interaction styles and high context thinking/communication styles (see above). The language offered in this
chapter may help faculty be more explicit with students about the kind of discourse they expect in the classroom
and how to engage across difference within that context.

The diversity of the Yale-NUS student body presents unique demands and learning opportunities for all
members of the Yale-NUS community. The frameworks above are intended to aid both faculty and students
in their process of navigating diversity at Yale-NUS. At the same time, although these guidelines are useful,
they are by no means absolute, and meaningful conversations can emerge through questioning their relevance
and criticizing the way in which culture is represented through these guidelines. Ultimately, we hope that
having a common starting point will enable faculty to engage with students on these issues, and also help
faculty develop their sensitivity towards intercultural engagement in the classroom.

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