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Deborah Berho

George Fox University, dberho@georgefox.edu

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Embracing the Stranger

Deborah Berho

When university educators think of internationalizing curriculum, it is tempting to leave it up to those whose disciplines lend themselves to this endeavor: foreign languages, missions, social sciences and international business. Incorporating wider worldviews is obviously easier in some disciplines than others. However, in the widest sense, internationalization is about respecting differences. Students may study about ethnic groups and international policies, but the true measuring stick will be how they interact with individuals from other nations, both in the U.S. and abroad.

While I am privileged to teach Spanish, a field in which internationalization is a given, all faculty members can teach and model this respect for other cultures. Following are some biblical reflections on the principle, as well as some thoughts that may spark ideas for faculty in varied disciplines to more purposefully cultivate a larger worldview. I am heavily indebted for these ideas to David I. Smith and Barbara Carvill's book, *The Gift of the Stranger: Faith, Hospitality, and Foreign Language Learning* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

Smith and Carvill highlight the scriptural concept of "the foreigner" or "exile." Throughout the Old Testament, God requires the people of Israel to show kindness to foreigners among them, in remembrance of their own time as exiles. He also indicates that He has a special tenderness for this group, along with widows and orphans (all essentially powerless in the societal structure of the time).

This is a significant theme for those living in the U.S. in the 21st century (indeed, since its inception as a "first-world nation"). There are, and will continue to be, immigrants from many nations. Most of our students won't live abroad, but all of them will have the opportunity, to interact with international students. Smith and Carvill propose that "hospitality to the stranger" is "an overarching metaphor and spiritual virtue in foreign language education" (82); I would argue that it holds for all of Christian higher education.

How can we go about this worthy endeavor? Setting up situations where students interact in some way with those different from them can be a challenge. Invite guest speakers who serve as representatives not only of their country of origin, but of the immigrant experience, or offer academic credit for taking advantage of these opportunities as they arise in the community or other parts of campus. After the visit, discuss both the listening process (accent, dialectic variation, etc.) and the hearing process (what they were able to pick up about the speaker's worldview). While immigrant communities are somewhat invisible to middle-class America, people who have special expertise and knowledge in a wide variety of disciplines are accessible. They may not be working in their field due to language barriers or U.S. professional exam requirements (for instance, my doctor friend found work pumping gas until he could pass the tests). The local news and newspaper, restaurants and state professional organizations are great places to start networking to find such guests.

Beyond guest speakers, experiential learning is long-lasting, and the experience of being "a stranger" is very valuable. Language teaching facilitates this experience. For example, many Spanish professors require their students to attend a Spanish-speaking church service. This is a first-time experience for

some, and causes students to feel uncomfortable, not only because of the linguistic environment, but also because they are not used to being in the minority.

Some of the discomfort of being a foreigner can be simulated in the classroom. Feelings of frustration rush over a student who is unable to express in the foreign language what they want to say. At that moment, “the teacher must step back and reflect with the class on what just happened, why it happened, and how the students felt” (62).

Of course, students can feel voiceless and frustrated in any course due to a variety of circumstances. Christian educators in all fields have the opportunity to explore these feelings of frustration and inadequacy with their students, not only helping students to overcome them for personal development, but also aiding students to reflect on who else might feel “a stranger,” and in what circumstances. The recognition of feelings of powerlessness and discomfort and appropriate assistance to overcome them foster both self-respect and respect for others in similar situations.

On most of our campuses, many students avail themselves of the multiple opportunities to study abroad or travel abroad with university groups. This allows them to experience a deeper degree of the powerlessness associated with being a foreigner. In my students’ journals of their semesters abroad, many have reflected that this time away from everything familiar was a time of tremendous spiritual growth, in which they find the special affection God has for the “exile.” Smith and Carvill observe, “It is important that they [our students] experience the rigors and sufferings of being, so to speak, ‘in Egypt.’ However, doing so also carries with it an unexpected spiritual blessing: It provides them with the opportunity to learn in a unique way that they are in God’s special care” (61).

Every faculty member in contact with a student who is going or has gone abroad has the opportunity to help the student reflect on this principle, process the experience and share it in class or in an informal office chat. Students continue to sort out all that happened, all that they learned and the difficulties of returning a changed person to an unchanged campus. The sincere interest of a professor and possible speaking opportunity is invaluable in debriefing.

Another significant opportunity for professors in all disciplines to model respect for “the stranger” is through interactions with foreign students or missionary kids on campus. This can be done with students in your classes by providing safe avenues (through journaling or reflection papers, for example) in which they can process their experience as minorities or visitors in the U.S. and share this with their Anglo classmates if they desire. Ask if they feel comfortable sharing about an area of expertise in their culture in comparison to a topic under study. Beyond the classroom, reach out and befriend foreign students. Include them when you get together at the local coffee shop just to talk. Invite them to your home, to share in a family birthday party, or see what Thanksgiving is all about! Your willingness to show hospitality to the stranger sets an important standard for students who look to you as a model, and will enrich your own life in unexpected ways.

Some students catch the vision of seeing “the stranger” as individuals created in God’s image and thus worthy of respect. On their own, a few choose to befriend international students; others begin seeking out immigrants or attending an immigrant church to establish relationships with “strangers.” However, to a large extent, the responsibility rests on faculty members to encourage students to reflect on the need to show God’s kindness to those who are outsiders living in the U.S. This awareness is one the most important contributions we can bring to students. Ten years from now, they probably won’t

remember how to conjugate a verb in Spanish, or remember the principal battles of the Civil War, but if they hold compassion and respect for people different from them, we have advanced the cause of Christ-centered higher education.

by Deborah Berho, Assistant Professor of Spanish, George Fox University dberho@georgefox.edu