

Communicating Across Cultures: How a Conversation in Another Culture Changed My Life

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“How can a conversation change my life?” After four years of living in America, I am still a young Mainland Chinese. I still love Chinese food and enjoy all the beautiful things in the world. One does not think daily conversations can have such a huge effect on us, especially when topics are discussed cross-culturally. Then I paused and asked myself, “is there another answer to this question? Had I not been living in US for the past four years, would I still be the same person I am today?” Living in US, such a different country from my home country-China, I encountered cultural shocks, learnt to understand people, think and behave differently, and realized how life would be much more beautiful if we could embrace all the diversities that a cross-cultural conversation would bring us. In this sense, my work and life in US have already changed me, and more importantly, the experience of communicating across cultures will continue to change my life and the world.

From China to US

The day I arrived in the US, I was overwhelmed with the feelings of ecstasy: I was finally free to realize my “American dream”. However, this feeling was soon replaced by a sense of loss because I had to start my life from scratch in such a different culture. I found myself so confined living in an American countryside without public transportation, and for the first time in my life I felt extremely homesick. I even missed my bicycle I left behind in China. At school, I found I could hardly understand the professors and what fellow students may have been talking or joking about. I felt misplaced like a fish out of water.

An Incident of “Culture shock”

During my first semester at school, I was sharing an office with my professor who was very nice to me. One day, when I stepped into the office I saw the professor on his phone. I proceeded to put my bag on my table and got ready to read. At that time, the professor stopped talking on the phone, turned to me and said: “I am having a private phone call, would you please walk outside for a few minutes.” His tone was polite enough, but still I was shocked. I thought he was rude by directly requesting my leave as if he was chasing me out the office. Embarrassed, I retreated outside. I thought I have lost face. Afterwards, I talked with one of my American classmates about this incident. This classmate was not surprised about the professor’s behavior at all. Instead, he was surprised to find that it was even an issue for me in the first place! After our conversation, I realized the cultural differences between Chinese and American ways of communication: Firstly, in a country with the biggest population in the world, Chinese society does not regard individual privacy as a big issue. Secondly, Chinese culture

values the indirect way of communication in order to avoid direct personal confront. Everything should be done “naturally” and in a harmonious way. On the other hand, “losing face” is not as a big issue in US as in China. After realizing these differences, I feel more comfortable in my behavior in US society; furthermore I can better understand and predict the behavior of people from different cultural backgrounds.

I gradually came to realization that why America is a country for “the brave”. I need to learn how to survive both in school and in society, just like the early immigrants in this country did. I began to embrace the new life whole-heartily. At a professor’s suggestion, I read local newspapers everyday to improve my English, and gradually I got to know more about the issues and topics which interest people. I actively participated in community activities and engaged people in various conversations. As a shy person with few friends back in China, I found myself was surrounded by a lot of friends from different cultures.

I came to learn more about myself and my own culture at deeper level. For the first time in my life, I began to become aware of my value system and beliefs. When living in another different culture, a person may find it hard to take cultural issues for granted. In comparing different cultures, I learned more about Chinese culture because I am obliged to know more when interacting with those people who are interested in Chinese culture. Living in a new culture does not mean you have to give up your own culture. In this sense, I have not changed. I am glad that I can be a “qualified” cultural ambassador to US for Chinese people. I found that I am more proud of my Chinese culture background than I was four years ago.

One day, an American lady who I knew well, told me that her interactions with me really helped change her previous negative image of the Chinese people. “We are more similar than we are different,” she told me. I could not agree with her more. However, I wonder where she got the negative image from in the first place. This question really bothered me and I tried hard to find the answer. But one thing seemed to be clear: Without a real willingness to learn and to listen, one can hardly begin a meaningful conversation, which should be a two-way communication. No one single culture is superior to others and we all should learn how to respect the differences and then come to value the diversity of the world and society. I believe that more cross-cultural conversation may help solve many of the world problems today.

Conclusion

Four years ago, I opened an important door in my life which leads to other doors that have totally changed my life. This is a door of conversation. I am still trying to keep the conversation going on, although I may still encounter many hardships, may lose face, or may have my heart broken. I can proudly say: I am not afraid, because I am a better man now! But most importantly, I can assure myself that I have already made a smart choice to start a great conversation; a conversation that changed and will continue to change not only myself but also others in this world I converse with, for the better.