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# From the Roller Coaster to the Round Table: Smoothing Rough Relationships Between Foreign Students & Faculty Members

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When I first began to consider intercultural relationships as I have known them, I decided I needed a symbol to represent the ideas tumbling into my mind; a focus for my quest for understanding of how best to approach this opportunity. The rainbow, I decided. But as I pondered further on the nature of intercultural relations, the rainbow was replaced by an intercontinental roller coaster filled with passengers; some with eyes wide open in order not to miss one moment of life's intercultural experiences, others with eyes tightly closed, hoping it would all just go away.

With my symbol in place, I struggled with how I could begin to express the frustration, sorrow, anger, and misery I had heard expressed by both foreign students and American faculty. I decided to dust off and use my collection of statements which I had entitled "Can This Relationship Be Saved?"--statements gleaned from interviews, conversations, discussions, and discreet eavesdropping over a two-year period. The participants in this imaginary relationship are Professor X (American), Student Y (International) and the intercultural counselor.

## Professor X (American)

"I want to be effective in teaching the international students, but I can't understand what they're saying and they can't understand me. I'm talking simple,

ordinary statements and questions; never mind concepts; that's another story. These students take an inordinate amount of my time and that of the departmental secretary to whom they often won't listen because she is female. In fact, they don't listen to the women faculty half the time. They want a degree but they have no study skills. They're pushy and treat me as if I were their servant. I know they can't get away with this in their own country; why do they try it here? They want me to do all of the adjusting. They've ruined our American market because the American students don't want to be around someone they can't understand. After all, who wants to sit through hours of unintelligible oral presentations? If I don't give them the grade they want, they will often go clear to the president about it. They are poorly prepared, especially for graduate work. They should learn English before they come here. I don't want to teach them either English or study skills. I want to teach my subject matter. I want to like these people, but they make it darned near impossible. I wish they would all just go home. I've had it."

## Student Y (International)

"I want to be a good student so that my family will be proud of me, but university work is so different in the United States. I want to meet Americans, talk with them and become friends with them, but this is difficult because I don't live on campus as

a graduate student. Anyway, Americans are so impatient and so busy. They are also very independent and don't realize that we do not become independent of our family as early as they do.

"The professors want us to participate actively in class discussions which is something we're not used to. In my country, the professor lectured; we listened and took notes. The final examination was everything. We didn't have to do any critical thinking; we just had to remember what the professor said and write that on the examination paper. We never had multiple choice or true/false tests. I thought a multiple choice test meant I should give more than one answer so I did, and failed the test.

"In my country there is a social and physical distance between teacher and student. I wish the American professors would realize that we need more attention and advice than American students, at least in the beginning. We are used to a lot of direction from our professors; they tell us what to do and we do it. I had never done a research paper and I was so frustrated in the beginning. I didn't know how to use the library facilities, nor did I know enough to ask for help. In my country we used the library for studying, not for research.

"When I passed the examination to enter the university, I had to choose a major—I had about a hundred choices. I got my seventh choice. American professors don't understand that a student coming to the U.S. for an MBA might have had literature as an undergraduate major because that was the major assigned. We value education and study hard in the U.S., but we often don't work in a way to

become academically successful. I wish the professors here would be more definite about what they want.

"I wish also that we could live on campus at least for the first semester, especially if we arrive during the summer. We are told we must live off campus because we are graduate students and should be able to take care of ourselves. Take care of ourselves? When I came here I didn't know enough English; I didn't know how to drive; I didn't know anything! Any American freshman could take better care of himself than I could when I first arrived in the U.S. I didn't have sufficient opportunity to practice speaking English before I arrived on campus. I was so disappointed when I realized how poorly I spoke English. I want to do good work and to please my professors, but I do wish that I could be accepted as I am and not be expected to act as if I were an American."

### **The Intercultural Counselor's Perspective**

Professor X wants to be a competent, caring teacher of international students. Student Y wants to do good work the family will be proud of. However, neither of these two people, from completely different cultural backgrounds and educational systems, has been adequately prepared to deal with what they regard as strange, if not undesirable, behavior in each other. Both are so caught up in the stress of dealing with an unfamiliar culture that they tend to forget each other's rights and needs and the need to work together and not at cross-purposes.

I counselled with the two over a considerable period of time with

encouraging results. We concentrated on discussing the rights and needs of both parties in an intercultural relationship. In the final session, attended by both parties, a number of points of agreement were reached, the most important of which was that both parties in an intercultural relationship must understand that though there are real differences between them, neither's value system is better or worse, but simply unique, and that acceptance of another value system does not imply agreement with, or approval of, that system. It simply recognizes its right to exist as it is.

Both Professor X and Student Y agreed that appreciation of and understanding of another culture requires setting aside for a time the lenses through which we have viewed life and putting on other lenses through which we will gain another perspective. Both agreed to put aside their own time-worn lenses and to try on some new ones, thus enriching their lives and the lives of others who will follow after them.

### Conclusion

Traditionally, at the end of the rainbow, there is a pot of gold. At the end of our roller coaster ride, however, we find a roundtable—a table which will accommodate all of the riders from all points of the compass—

A place where we will be not "apart," but "a part" of a gathering...for at a

roundtable there are no sides, and all are invited to wholeness and to food.

Roundtabling means no preferred seating, no first and last,... no corners for 'the least of these,'

Roundtabling means being with, a part of, together, and one.

It means room for the Spirit and gifts and disturbing profound peace for all...

And it is we in the present who are mixing and kneading the dough for the future. We can no longer prepare for the past. (Lathrop 1977)

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### About the Author

*Shirley Stapleton teaches in the MATESOL program at Azusa Pacific University. She has over twenty years experience teaching ESL/EFL at all levels, has conducted teacher-training workshops in Taiwan, and is a consultant in ESL for the Pomona, California School District. Her research interests center on teacher behavior in the classroom.*