

## Three Things I've Learned About Intercultural Learning Communities

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UWC-USA Leadership Blog

I spent 25 years at St. John's College, which is an international community of learners. I came to UWC-USA, which is a VERY international community of learners. We have students every year from over 90 countries, 125 languages are spoken on our high school campus, and the cafeteria at the United Nations could hardly feature more nationalities than ours.



The transition from higher education to secondary had few major surprises - a school year has highs and lows no matter where the school is and what its focus may be.

But I did learn - or relearn - three things about intercultural learning communities:

We don't always speak the same language, even when we use the same words. A student caught me on the stairs on my first day on campus. He politely approached me and addressed me in plain English. "Hello. I'm Abdo from Iraq and I have a question: How did you come into power?" I was taken aback and had no idea what he meant. I heard him. I understood the words. But I had no idea what he meant.

Questions matter as much as answers for creating dialogue, but only if we are listening. A question opens a space. And a more surprising question opens a bigger space. Abdo from Iraq asked me about power and surprised me. I started thinking about the kinds of power I have, the kinds of power others perceive me to have, what power means to a young man from Iraq, what power means to a woman from New Mexico. Tough questions cause us to reflect on things we think we know.

Intercultural understanding isn't just about understanding the other, it is about coming to know ourselves in new ways. This means that we have to get to know what is "other" about ourselves from the standpoint of those in our community. When we encourage students to consider applying to UWC-USA, we highlight the possibility of getting to know students and teachers from other countries because that's a fun adventure - like a grand trip abroad. We don't highlight the equally important self-discovery required of true intercultural understanding because self-discovery is less fun - like a visit to a psychologist. Yet our alumni consistently speak of personal and social growth that is only possible from mutual respect and understanding along with taking some long, hard looks at oneself. For students and faculty at UWC, we want to encourage intercultural understanding that takes into account relations of power and privilege and different perceptions of how equity is enacted in educational settings.

Of course I've learned more than three things since coming to UWC-USA. But these three are the most important ones to date and form the core of my message to new students as they arrive on campus each year.