

Intercultural Encounter in Solidarity Bridge

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For Solidarity Bridge and our sister organization Puente de Solidaridad, intercultural encounter is a critical aspect of solidarity. We believe that an authentic intercultural encounter can lead to a deeper experience of solidarity. At the same time, we believe that the full potential for solidarity cannot be realized without an authentic encounter.

An intercultural encounter can occur between those who live in two countries with different cultures, for example, between people from the United States and Bolivia, or between sub-cultures within the same country, such as between someone who belongs to a dominant group and someone who belongs to a historically marginalized group.

Intercultural encounter has the potential to be a transformative experience. But, to be fully transformative, encounters require a number of conditions from those engaging in the encounter. One can think of three important stages in this process; preparation, the encounter itself, and post-encounter reflection. The boundaries between these stages are not clearly delineated, but for heuristic purposes they are grouped in three stages.

First Stage – Preparation (Preconditions necessary for a fruitful encounter)

The dynamic identified in Spanish as *“concientización”* - conscientization is at the heart of the transformational power of intercultural encounter. Conscientization conveys the idea of developing and changing consciousness. In spiritual language, one might refer to this as the dynamic of conversion (metanoia) - creating a new way of looking and orienting oneself towards life. Both conscientization and conversion begin with the foundational need to develop self-knowledge. While not exhaustive, this section aims to name some of the key preconditions necessary for a transformative intercultural encounter:

Self-awareness - One must cultivate awareness of oneself and one’s culture and recognize the biases and prejudices that emerge from that culture. The preparation stage aims to deepen an individual’s self-knowledge, their understanding of culture as a construction, and their recognition and awareness of unconscious bias.

Dynamics and histories of power / prestige / privilege - Learning to recognize one’s own power and the power dynamics within and between cultures deepens the potential for an authentic encounter. Through careful preparation, individuals can develop deeper awareness of the power differential that inescapably exists between people and cultures.

Cultivating curiosity – Becoming curious about oneself and one’s own culture(s) as well as about people and cultures different from oneself, is critical preparation for fruitful intercultural encounter. This cultivation of curiosity requires an acknowledgement of the gaps in one’s own knowledge and a commitment to lifelong learning.

Valuing multiple perspectives – Intercultural encounter requires a deep belief that the pursuit of truth requires diverse perspectives. Those engaging in encounter must have respect for diversity and difference and a recognition that they, themselves, possess only one aspect of truth.

Acceptance of discomfort and ambiguity – Crossing cultures takes one out of their comfort zone. Mistakes will inevitably be made, but in the space of discomfort and uncertainty, deep learning and transformation is possible.

Development of communication tools – Fruitful intercultural encounter requires good communication. It is important to develop skills for listening deeply, asking questions and engaging in respectful dialogue. It is also critical to understand that these tools are themselves culturally constructed.

Humility – All that has been written above can be summarized by understanding humility. Humility recognizes that individuals and cultures are complex and always changing. Understanding oneself, one’s culture or another’s culture will never have an endpoint. Therefore, it is imperative to always approach with openness and curiosity, recognizing that one’s own perspective is always limited and there is always more to learn. Humility requires acknowledging that everyone has something to learn and everyone has something to teach. When approaching another with humility, one seeks to be attentive to the creation of mutual relationships that honor the best in each one and one’s culture and challenge systems and structures that create oppression and marginalization.

Finally, in preparing for an intercultural encounter, it is fundamental that those engaging in the encounter have an open heart and mind to allow Mystery to act.

Second Stage - Encounter

The stage of encounter is the stage of discovery – the discovery of another person and culture, and the discovery of new perspectives and solutions. The stage of encounter is also the stage of mystery and surprise. In the midst of intercultural encounters, something always happens that wasn’t anticipated or expected. These surprises and discoveries are the seeds of learning. The moment of encounter is a privileged moment of being present with another, of sharing common humanity, of giving and of receiving. New life can take root in this space that exists between “me” and “you”. In the moment of fruitful encounter, our worlds expand as we gain insight through another’s perspective and also as a new mutual perspective is born in this shared space. In the stage of encounter, dialogue happens, barriers are broken down, and new pathways are created.

These encounters generate a mutual commitment that allows all to move forward, co-creating together. Our experiences in the Solidarity Family have taught us that fruitful intercultural encounter allows us to experience the fullness of our humanity.

In addition to all that is described in the preparation section, we believe these guidelines are critical to helping make the moment of the encounter fruitful.

1. **Approach with intentionality** - If one can be intentional about the encounter and approach the "other" with openness, curiosity and interest, the potential for the encounter and dialogue increases dramatically.
2. **Be aware of judgment** - The judging mind is always present. In the moment of encounter, one needs to create awareness of the role of the mind in order to interrupt the process of judgment and cultivate a kind of "unknowing."
3. **Ask questions and engage in dialogue** - When one does not understand something, it is important to ask questions and engage in horizontal dialogue in order to cultivate mutual understanding across difference.
4. **Share life** - For an encounter to be fruitful, one must be willing to share one's life and one's self. The dialogue and relationship must develop mutually. This requires self disclosure, honesty and vulnerability.
5. **Desire to create something new** - Each person must have the will/desire to open new pathways, to experience empathy, and to work alongside others to embrace a common project and solve problems in each new context.
6. **Promote a solidarity that transforms the context** - Intercultural encounters do not exist for themselves, but for the creation of a more humane world. When one enters into the encounter with this belief, one is committed to the promotion of greater solidarity and justice.
7. **Commit to self-reflection** - In order to deepen the encounter and improve future encounters, self-reflection and evaluation is critical both during and after the experience.

Third stage - Post-Encounter

For the intercultural encounter to be truly transformational, a period of post-encounter reflection is critical. It is helpful to have a time for questioning / reflection that is both personal and communal. It is also helpful to do this reflection in both affinity and cross-cultural groups. A strong, trained facilitator could be helpful in processing with individuals and/or groups. Some questions that can be helpful to engage are:

- Was there an authentic dialogue that emerged at the meeting? How do I know?
- What did I learn about myself and the “other”?
- Where did I experience discomfort during the encounter? Upon further reflection, what does this discomfort have to teach me?
- What surprised me about myself in the meeting? What surprised me about the “other”? Why?
- In what ways did the encounter reveal my assumptions and/or unconscious bias?
- What questions arise after the meeting?
- What do I feel called to from this encounter?

This paper has attempted to outline elements of a three-phase process for intercultural encounters that could lead to a personal, social, and intercultural transformation. But full transformation is not a linear process and it requires more than a singular experience. If one believes in God’s invitation to co-create a different world, then conscientization and conversion are life-long and ever-deepening processes. This three-phase process can be better understood as cyclical. Each experience of intercultural encounter holds an invitation to enter into the next experience with deeper awareness, knowledge and intentionality. And that next experience of encounter then holds the potential to result in fuller transformation – of individuals, communities and the wider world – moving us closer to God’s vision for our world.