

Stereotypes and Shortcuts

Concordia Language Villages Worldview Blog

Last night I had a number of second-year students (designated “seniors” at most high schools) in my home to sign the code of conduct that commits them to uphold our school values and rules. Many of them stayed for conversation in my living room afterward, including students from Spain, the UK, Nepal, Hong Kong, and Palestine. Our business concluded, the conversation turned to life in a boarding school with students from 96 countries and even more cultural traditions. One student noted the wide range of comfort levels with hugging as an expression of friendship. He observed how comfortable Latinx are with hugging--maybe a little too comfortable for his tastes. Others immediately began riffing on other broad observations about Latinx people on campus and in the local community. Musical tastes, and more importantly music volume, became a topic of conversation. And then there was a moment of realization. United World College-USA is located in New Mexico, which has a large Hispanic population. Mine is a Latinx name and face; I’m small of stature and notably brown and have deep roots in New Mexico. The student who made the initial observation abruptly ended the conversation, mumbling sheepishly about not meaning to perpetuate stereotypes. Apparently stereotypes become uncomfortable when you are sharing them with the president of your school, who may or may not fit those stereotypes!

Of course at an international boarding school, every moment can be a teaching moment. In this instance I chose to laugh and silently commend him for recognizing that it was worth pausing whenever we find ourselves staring down the rabbit hole of “the stereotype conversation.”

The human brain is inclined to recognize patterns. From patterns of letters and numbers to patterns of behavior in others, the search for patterns creates order out of the chaos of much of the stimuli our brains process. [citation] Stereotypes might be viewed as a way that our brains recognize patterns and make sense of a new culture or people. When we are being stereotyped it surely feels limiting and unfair. But when we engage in stereotyping, we are trying to make sense of what we are experiencing.

The student who caught (and checked) himself was acknowledging me. He realized I was both a member of the group being discussed as well as a person involved in the conversation. The dual role I played in that moment startled him and created a sense of awkwardness.

So, what’s the big deal? Why are we nervous about stereotyping if it is a function of our natural inclination to find patterns in the world, including the world of human behavior?

Those of us who live and work in cross-cultural environments are wary of stereotypes because a true cultural encounter, where deep learning happens, is fueled by curiosity and a desire to understand. But it isn’t just about the importance of curiosity and the desire to understand others in a diverse community dedicated to peace through intercultural exchange. It’s about something more fundamental--something so fundamental that it makes human community possible, something so fundamental that there is no hope for global citizenship without it: We have to push away our natural inclination to stereotype if we are to have any hope of recognizing the other. Stereotypes can help us get to some of the pattern recognition that provides access to those who are different from us. But we can't start there if we want to move from observing differences to understanding and embracing them.

Stereotypes are shortcuts, but ones that can distract and detract from the journey into discovering the beauty and power of the very differences they claim to name. If culture matters, we have to be willing to follow our curiosity one individual at a time.