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Language: A Bridge or A Border?

Language is a method of communication that connects and enables a people to develop their cultural roots from which they grow as one unified whole. However, as students representing Siena College visiting Centro Cívico Hispanoamericano, Inc. in Albany, New York, we, Caroline and Elizabeth, realized that language does not always serve as a bridge or a means of becoming acquainted with other people. In fact, language can serve as a barrier between people, especially between those of different cultures, thereby keeping two people from potentially gaining an understanding and respect for one another. Thus, although language can serve as a bridge, there exists barrier that first needs to first be broken in order for the bridge or the method of communication to be formed.

At Siena College, Dr. Marcela Garcés assigned our Advanced Spanish Conversation and Composition class to learn more about the Hispanic community of the Albany area and to write articles reflecting our experiences in the community for *Latino New York Magazine*. As a Franciscan college, it is the mission of Siena College to embody the vision and values of St. Francis of Assisi i.e. “affirmation of the unique worth of each person, delight in diversity, appreciation for beauty, service with the poor and marginalized, a community where members work together in friendship and respect, and commitment to building a world that is more just, peaceable, and humane” (Siena College, 2006, May). Thus, by learning about the Hispanic community for our project, we were able to incorporate these values of St. Francis: appreciating and respecting the unique worth of each person and fostering a community where an understanding of each other can develop.

In order to complete the project, we decided to learn more about Centro Cívico Hispanoamericano, Inc. This organization is a not-for-profit founded in 1975 in Albany, New York. By providing services such as child care, language classes, and economic and social guidance, the organization hopes to develop and nurture a sense of identity, community, cultural, and economic awareness within the Hispanic community (Centro Cívico Hispanoamericano, Inc., n.d.). We focused specifically on the child care program because these children, ranging in age from two to five, are learning how to embrace their Hispanic culture as well as the American culture.

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one. In addition, we were interested in seeing how the employees incorporated both cultures and how the children developed with this kind of upbringing.

Although this project was a wonderful way to embody the values of St. Francis and to gain a better understanding of the Hispanic community in Albany, it was very challenging to go and speak with native Spanish-speakers in Spanish and learn about their personal lives because we did not have the opportunity to develop a relationship with them over a more extended period of time. In addition, our coming to the Center was initiated because of a class requirement and not for the sole reason of getting to know them. Thus, with these factors, the way in which our relationship developed with the workers of the Center automatically changed.

It was the idea of Ms. Luz Pereyra, the director of the Center, that we visit the bilingual school for a couple of days so that we could develop a better relationship with the employees. Doing this would also enable us to have a better understanding of the child care program and its goals in raising children in a bicultural setting.

On our first visit, as anticipated, there were some obstacles. The employees (all female) did not know that we could speak Spanish and when we arrived at the Center, they told us that we should remain in the office until the director, Ms. Pereyra, arrived. Although we had already been there, Ms. Pereyra did not notify the faculty about our visit that was scheduled for that day. From their point of view, there was no way that we could communicate with them, so waiting for the director would be best. This was sad and restrictive. We could not get to know and appreciate these incredible women. Why? - because of a misunderstanding that we did not speak Spanish. At this point, language was no longer a foundation upon which we could work in order to build a relationship. Instead, language served as the barrier between all of us.

Rather than wait in the office as instructed, however, we decided to leave the office and become acquainted with employees. We knew that we could speak Spanish and we wanted to break that barrier and that lack of trust that was keeping us from learning about the women, their stories, and their culture. After leaving the office, we went and sat down with these women. There was subtle pause before we began to speak Spanish with them.

Beginning the conversation with them was difficult because we as well as the women were no longer children like those in the child care, ready to absorb whatever came our way. We were all adults, and not just adults, but adults of different cultures, experiences, and even more importantly, languages. In addition, we wanted to learn about the women’s native countries and their journeys here, which is something incredibly personal. To step outside of all of our comfort
zones and to open up to one another was very challenging in this delicate situation. However, we had to initiate and lead the conversation. We needed to show the women, primarily, that we were able to speak Spanish and, secondly, that we valued them and we wanted to get to know them.

Initiating the conversation and challenging that lack of trust that existed between both cultures enabled us to start breaking down that wall and building that bridge. Gradually, our conversation became very fluid. It was incredibly interesting and we learned about their cultures of Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico. Many of the women have families and they shared their valuable and personal stories with us. A sense of understanding and appreciation started to develop. We also learned that they were encouraged to leave their native countries to pursue the American dream. In fact, they said that the schools in their countries emphasized learning English. However, they noted that learning English is difficult because of the grammatical inconsistencies and its pronunciation. It was frustrating for them. It was at this point that this separation, this border, no longer existed because we were able to identify with them with respect to the challenges we have faced trying to learn and speak their language.

Conversing with one another was very enjoyable for both the women and us, and we soon found out that the women had not experienced this kind of open communication with many other English-speakers. In fact, one time, according to the employees, there was a volunteer from the Unites States that did not speak Spanish and it was difficult for the two parties because of the lack of vocabulary and knowledge. Also, the volunteer did not want to learn Spanish like they wanted to learn English. There existed a border between them that would not be broken and it was instead being built, becoming larger day by day. The women were frustrated with her for not even wanting to learn. Communication was minimal between them and eventually the volunteer left.

Essentially, there are two sides of that language barrier and neither side fully understands each other. In order to break this barrier, it is important to want to learn and actually learn another language. Language is not just a study of grammar and vocabulary. It is a study of a people, their history, and their values. Eventually, this study of a people can turn into an understanding and even identification with those people as we experienced in our project. Thus, the barrier can be broken. However, it is necessary to take the lead, initiate the process, and take the steps necessary in order that language can serve as a method of communication upon which an “affirmation of the unique worth of each person, delight in diversity” and “a community where members can work together in friendship and respect” can develop (Siena College, 2006).
Works Cited
