

Incorporating Cultural Relativism within Communication Centers

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Throughout my undergraduate years at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, I have studied many different theories and concepts in the anthropology department. As I continued to learn more about my major and its disciplines, I noticed that a lot of the cultural anthropology theories were unconsciously exemplified within UNCG's Speaking Center. One key theory that often appeared was cultural relativism. Within this essay, I will discuss how cultural relativism should be added to the Speaking Center's policy book and implemented within the Center's training workshops for student employees. By doing this, consultants will have a better understanding of the concept and how important it is to enforce cultural relativism in consultations and also between staff members.

Cultural relativism is the idea that a person's beliefs, practices, and values are better understood based on that person's own culture, rather than being judged against the criteria of another (Tilley, 2000). This anthropological concept originated from the perspective of anthropologists that were doing fieldwork. When scientists are in the field, they temporarily suspend their own moral judgements and focus on understanding and developing empathy with the foreign norms they are studying. Often times, speaking centers are already striving for this ethical practice within their center. However, by explicitly articulating the terminology and its importance, these centers can have a concrete idea of ethical practices. A main problem that can arise within the Speaking Center if cultural relativism is not directly acknowledged is

that a potential pattern of disrespect could form between speakers and consultants, as well as staff. The mission statement for UNCG's Speaking Center is to "Support speakers in their ongoing process of becoming more confident and competent communicators through instruction, collaborative consultation, & feedback." In order for this speaking center to carry out its mission statement, they must make everyone feel equal and welcomed.

When it comes to training the consultants within the Speaking Center, it is very important for them to understand their role as consultants. By being a consultant, an individual must be able to create an interpersonal relationship with the different students that visit the Speaking Center (Yook & Sayre, 2015). In order for the student and their consultants to create this relationship, cultural relativism must be present. Since the Speaking Center is open to all students on campus, the staff works with a lot of diverse students. With cultural relativism-present in the consultation, it helps the consultant successfully create the right climate needed for the speaker to open up to them about the problems they face. In order for this to occur, a workshop that would help implement cultural relativism during a consultation should be held at the beginning of each semester. During this workshop, the host might discuss the demographics at both the school and the surrounding community, mainly paying key attention to the demographics of individuals that are considered non-native, such as Asian, Hispanic, Non-resident alien, etc. Once this information is noted, the leaders and the consultants need to discuss some of

the problems that could arise during these consultations such as conflicts with religious beliefs or miscommunication due to a language barrier. After this information is gathered, they should collectively find some cultural facts about the cultures they are likely to see in the center. The next step after finding these facts is to turn them into questions. These questions can then be used when staff sets up the appointment and at the beginning of each consultation. For example, simply asking someone if they would prefer to work with a specific gender. This will help all of the staff members learn more about them and develop ways to ensure that the speaker is comfortable during their consultations. A good example as to why this training needs to be implemented occurred at UNCG's Speaking Center. A woman, who was Muslim, came in to the center to set up a consultation. When it was noted she would be working with a male consultant, she spoke up for herself and told the staff member that due to her religious values, she could only work with female consultants. It was a good thing she spoke up for herself and her beliefs, yet if the center would have had more background knowledge or even an overview of the religion, that female would not have to feel uncomfortable or exposed about disclosing that information herself. The main reason why we need to initially acknowledge one's background or cultural beliefs is so that an individual feels welcomed and sees that the staff really cares about them and their experiences at the center.

In order for the Speaking Center to continue to be successful, the leadership must continue to build a steady, effective and supportive peer tutoring team. The center's staff can be enhanced if they are trained to work together rather than seeing their work as isolated from the overall goals of the center (Yook & Sayre, 2015). By the Speaking Center adding cultural relativism

to the handbook and implementing it during training workshops, each member will recognize that they must be able to empathize with one another in order to become a successful team of peer tutors. Initially a safe space must be created within the center and the workshops. A safe space in communication centers is a climate or atmosphere within the center which allows an individual to feel safe to express their genuine feelings on certain topics of their personal communication goals and not be judged or critiqued by the staff members they are talking to. An effective training opportunity that can be added to the first semester workshop is to let each staff member have the option of disclosing certain aspects of their culture. During this time they can discuss who they are, some of their cultural beliefs, sexual orientation, religious viewpoints, etc. It is important for the staff to know so they can be more aware of things they say. For example, at UNCG's Speaking Center, there was a staff member that was transgender. During the first semester workshop, he disclosed this information to his staff members. He also noted what name he wanted to be referred to and when referring to him use male pronouns such as "he" or "him." This not only allowed the staff members to ask questions they felt were necessary to make him comfortable within the center but it also allowed the staff members to get to know him better.

Overall, I think the anthropological theory of cultural relativism should be added to both the Speaking Center's handbook and training workshops in order for the consultants to be more aware. By bringing attention to cultural relativism, it will strengthen the amount of trust amongst the staff and during consultations with diverse speakers. This will also fortify the ethics of practice and effectiveness of the center with

not only the student body but also the surrounding community.

References

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