

Unleashing the Dark Side: Mismanaging Conflicts Across Cultures in a Classroom

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Tags

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Setting

Minolta College is a four-year, state-funded college in the northwestern part of the United States. The college was committed to its international focus in its institutional mission in the 1980s. While a large proportion of their student population continues to be international students, they undergone several changes in their internationalization policies. After several decades of revision and reorganization, the college revitalized International House (I-House), a traditional residential program that hosts U.S. and international students living and learning together. The I-House has both an academic course and co-curricular components required of the residents. Six students signed up for this new initiative in 2000. For this program, Dr. Smith, a professor of international politics, was assigned as lead instructor.

During the fall term, Dr. Smith agreed to teach a course called “Crossing borders: Crossing cultures.” Dr. Smith designed the course to include a series of non-U.S. documentary films to capture the current global issues. One of the sessions focused on international wars and ethnic conflicts and Dr. Smith decided to focus on the former Yugoslavian conflict in the 1990s. Initially, everyone was excited about the lecture, especially Dr. Smith

who asked two international students from the region to discuss the film. He hoped to bring authenticity to the class discussion of the issue. Drago is from Serbia, and Amila is from the former Bosnia-Herzegovina. Drago and Amila had been friendly and had worked well together in the past. Dr. Smith spoke to the class about his decision. In the beginning, everyone thought having these international students would be a good idea. However, despite everyone's good intentions and expectations, the lecture took an unexpected turn.

Case

In the beginning, Dr. Smith explains the lecture format. For the first two hours, the class watches a film, "Before the Rain," which focuses on three separate stories from different perspectives from three different locations. After a break, Drago and Amila are scheduled to share their opinions about the NATO intervention in the region in the 1990s. The class is expected to engage in a peaceful dialogue to reflect on the issue presented in the film and the two student speakers. "I am grateful that you two can share your opinions about the issue. After all, you are from the region, and you know about this case better than anyone else here at the college. I am sure you can be respectful while speaking to each other." All six students take their seats and face each other. Drago and Amila sit by the screen but across from each other. Dr. Smith turns on the film after a brief explanation and turns off the lights.

"Before the Rain" is a very emotional movie, described by the producers as, "the old struggle to ignite new passions." Even in the dark lecture room, everyone feels like they can sense each other's strong emotional reactions in the silence. The two guests are usually very cheerful and friendly, but they remain quiet throughout the film. "Once you hear the words, once you know the faces, and once you see the pictures, you begin to understand the stories," the film caption reads. Everyone, including Dr. Smith, seems to be captured by the film's intensity.

After the film has ended, Dr. Smith breaks the silence and asks the guests to share their thoughts about the movie and the issue. "So, Amila, what are your opinions about the film? Do you have insights into the situation on the ground that is different from the western journalists and scholars?" Amila looks at Drago before saying something, and Drago keeps looking down at the floor. Amila seems to sense Drago's agitation as he avoids his eye contact with Amila. Amila hesitates to respond to Dr. Smith. "Okay, I understand. It must have been a difficult movie for you, Amila," says Dr. Smith. "What about you, Drago. Do you have something to share with the class?" Dr. Smith notices that Drago hesitates to speak his thoughts. Drago looks at Amila and catches her eyes. Amila suddenly looks away from Drago. Dr. Smith witnesses their gestures of avoidance and silent confrontation and begins to be concerned about managing the classroom discussion. "Well, then, what about other classmates? Do you all have questions for the guests? What do you think about the issue represented in the film?" Everyone is hesitant to say anything and looks around the classroom, uncertainty on their faces.

Amila breaks the silence and begins to talk about her past. She begins to reveal her history: the unjustifiable attempt of the Serbs to invade Bosnia-Herzegovina. She says that she is from one of the Bosnian towns invaded by the Serbs during the conflict. While proudly sharing a picture of a beautiful, 400-year old bridge. Amila explains that the Serbs destroyed it. Amila raises her voice as she explains that she witnessed a group of Bosnian Muslims being taken away from the village, never to be seen again. Amila speaks her heart out and expresses the horrible experience as a young girl of Bosnian Muslim heritage. She explains that she remembers the war vividly as if it had happened to her yesterday, being scared and horrified. Everyone hears Amila's voice filled with her pain and sadness. Everyone notices that tears are running down her face. Amila

continues and accuses all Serbs of being criminals; she points out “the crimes” committed by the Serbian people against the Bosnian Muslims.

Amila continues her list of wrongdoings by the Serbian people until Drago snaps out of his silence and begins to counter Amila’s accusations against the Serbian people. Drago shares his perception of the Bosnian Muslims’ wrongdoings against the Serbian people in Bosnia-Herzegovina. He points out how the Bosnian Muslims had unfairly treated the Serbian people in the country during the conflict. Drago says that one of his best friends lost his house in his village. He explains that his friend’s family had been forced to get onto a bus and travel far away. Drago is also emotional and says that his friend lost everything, the only remaining memorabilia is his teddy bear. Drago ignores Amila’s claims of the atrocity against the Bosnian Muslims and justifies the Serbian people’s military actions in the Bosnia-Herzegovina territory as self-defence necessary to protect the Serbian people. Drago’s intensity is escalating while Amila has gone silent. By then, Dr. Smith realizes Amila’s cry for recognizing the suffering of the Bosnian Muslims has vanished completely.

Dr. Smith is unsure of intervening in the situation. The students in the class are also frozen and are unsure what to do. They realize this attempt at bridging cultures revealed the depth of pain inherent in war and the difficulty of healing.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What happened in the classroom that triggered these guests’ responses?
- Was this an appropriate lesson plan, topic and discussion for this class?
- What could have been alternative approaches to moderate the discussion?
- What could be done to support Amila and Drago in this situation?
- In what ways do you think this discussion may have affected students in the classroom? How could you support them in making sense of the situation?
- In what ways could universities support international students from countries with historical tensions with each other?