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## Listening with Humility

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## Listening with Humility

### Abstract

Presented in 2017 at the Internationalizing Christian Higher Education conference of the International Association for the Promotion of Christian Higher Education (IAPCHE) at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan, this paper extends the results presented in the author's 2016 paper, "[Culturally and Linguistically Humble: A Preparation for Living Abroad](#)." Taking the virtue of humility and integrating that into the training for Northwestern College students going abroad for a semester, the author's new paper both establishes how reflecting on humility has helped students to engage cross-culturally and also links humility with the conference theme of "listening to learn; learning to listen."

### About the Author

Dr. Diana Gonzalez' main interests revolve around how languages function and behave, especially in fields related to language in society and meaning. She has presented on those topics at national conferences of the North American Christian Foreign Language Association. Prior to joining Northwestern's faculty, Dr. Gonzalez served with Wycliffe Bible Translators and the Summer Institute of Linguistics, teaching at the Ricardo Palma University in Lima, Perú. Originally from Argentina, she also taught Spanish and German at Dordt College, as well as graduate and undergraduate linguistic courses at the universities of Chihuahua and Zacatecas in Mexico, and worked as an editor for a publishing ministry in Costa Rica.

## **Listening with Humility**

by Diana Gonzalez, Ph.D.

*This week God has been teaching me so much and specifically, He has been showing me glimpses of what it really means to be a part of the body of Christ.*

*My first glimpse was on Tuesday evening when I went with my group called “Solidarios” to go hand out coffees and hang out with homeless people again. I am so grateful to have such a unique opportunity...*

*These last few weeks, I have been noticing that it is something so special to interact with, and form friendships with a person other people refuse to even make eye contact with, let alone actually acknowledge and talk to. There was one man in particular that touched my heart that night. He was a precious black man who had come from France and only spoke French. As soon as he saw our group (and recognized a few of the others) I saw his face light up with a smile from ear to ear. We sat in a circle and talked with him for over a half hour. There were two of the girls in the group that spoke French, and the rest of us didn't speak or understand anything of the language. It was fascinating to watch them communicate. It was also an eye-opening experience. Normally I am the one interpreting for other people (in Spanish/English) and this time my friends were interpreting for me.*

*The language barrier didn't hold him back from asking me questions and wanting to know about me, and where I come from. We talked a little bit about the US, and Colorado, as I showed him pictures my mom had sent me from home. We also started*

*talking about how their definition of a “long” or “far” drive is VERY different than ours is in the US. (Extracted from a student’s blog, 2016)*

This comment is an example of the kind of experiences students have and how those impact their lives while spending a semester studying abroad.

Years ago, we introduced a one-credit Study-Abroad Cross Cultural Preparation course for our Spanish majors at Northwestern College, which was followed by another one-credit course—Enhancing the Study-Abroad Experience—intended to better prepare our majors for the experiences they would encounter abroad and to encourage them to think about their own culture and their Christian identity. During the first course, taken at the college, we discuss culture, motivations for studying abroad, fears, facing culture shock, and learning to reflect on cultural issues. The second course is taken online during the study-abroad semester and consists basically of reflecting about the experiences they have and the changes to their lives. It offers an opportunity to pause and start processing the many stimuli received every day.

We had noticed that, in general, students were not aware of the influence of their own culture in their perception of the world. Furthermore, they did not think of how influential this had been in their formation of a Christian identity. Therefore, it was important to discuss the characteristics of their own culture and how it had influenced their values.

It was also important to discuss motivations for studying abroad—although it is a requisite for all Spanish majors—in order to focus on differences between being a tourist or a neighbor and to develop acceptance of probable mistakes, being able to acknowledge them without feeling a failure. Culture shock would certainly be unavoidable during their time abroad,

and students needed to be aware of its signs and prepared to cope with all kinds of negative thoughts and feelings.

We began offering the Study Abroad Cross-Cultural Preparation course about five years ago, and we chose two books written from a Christian perspective as required readings. However, at the beginning of the spring semester 2016 I decided to include an article addressing cultural humility. That reading proved to be very productive and permeated student reflections during the rest of the semester. Therefore, I included questions related to humility as prompts for the reflective journals to be written during the second course: Enhancing the Study-Abroad Experience.

In this paper, I will first refer to the concept of cultural humility and present how ideas of humility and cultural humility permeated reflections and essays of students participating in the study-abroad semester as well as students preparing for studying-abroad next academic year. In addition, and related to the theme of this conference, it will be noted that learning to listen and listening to learn is an essential component of the learning process.

### **Cultural Humility: A Definition**

Presented by Tervalon and Murray-Garcia (1998), the concept of cultural humility emerged from the health disciplines. It incorporates “a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique, to redressing the power imbalances in the patient-physician dynamic, and to developing mutually beneficial and non-paternalistic clinical and advocacy partnerships with communities on behalf of individuals and defined populations” (p. 117).

Important tenets of this approach are lifelong commitment, self-evaluation and self-critique, and mutually beneficial solidarity partnerships, in the sense of not being based on

hierarchy but on a level of equality.

In addition, cultural humility can be defined as:

Having an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented rather than self-focused, characterized by respect and lack of superiority toward an individual’s cultural background and experience...

Therapists who are culturally humble not only strive to be effective but also cultivate a growing awareness that they are inevitably limited in their knowledge and understanding of a client’s cultural background, which motivates them to interpersonally attune themselves to the client in a quest to understand the individual client’s cultural background and experience. (Hook, Davis, Owen, Worthington, & Utsey, 2013, pp. 353, 354)

In “Engaging Clients with Cultural Humility,” Hook (2014) states that “the components of cultural humility provide a loosely held framework or guiding principles which move each of us beyond mere proficiencies or competencies, and place us in a role of a life-long learner regarding culture and interactions with those who are different than we are” (p. 278).

It is important for our majors to be aware of their limited knowledge of others’ cultural background, even when they read about the country before they go. They need to be willing to interact with persons of the host country for learning about their particularities, listening to them as well as being listened to, knowing their hosts, and being known by them. Expressions of humility in that context are, for example, asking questions and requiring clarification when they

are uncertain, expressing curiosity about the culture of the other, and showing empathy toward the interlocutor.

Donald DeGraaf (2015) in *There and Back: Living and Learning Abroad* mentions that “researchers have identified two additional factors that are necessary to develop cultural competence: 1) awareness that cultures are dynamic and ever changing; and 2) the practice of cultural humility” (p. 69).

Hocket and Muhanji (2017) in their book *Lessons from Cross-Cultural Collaboration: How Cultural Humility Informed and Shaped the Work of an American and a Kenyan* believe that the “key concepts of cultural humility are formulated around the following core themes:

1. Building relationships: the key foundational component;
2. Intentional listening: gathering information, listening to the needs of the people;
3. Setting aside predetermined biases and assumptions and critically examining them in light of new information and knowledge;
4. Collaboration and co-learning; learning with and from one another” (p. 5).

Thus, in consequence humility allows us to make mistakes. We don’t need to have all the answers anymore, or to be the center. It helps us to focus on the other, to listen and remain silent, and to be open to learn from others because they could be right.

According to Tangney (2000), key elements of humility include:

- accurate assessment of one’s abilities and achievements (not low self-esteem, self-deprecation).
- ability to acknowledge one’s mistakes, imperfections, gaps in knowledge, and

limitations...

- openness to new ideas, contradictory information, and advice.
- keeping of one’s abilities and accomplishments —one’s place in the world—in perspective (e.g., seeing oneself as just one person in a larger scheme of things).
- relatively low self-focus..., while recognizing that one is but one part of the larger universe.
- appreciation of the value of all things, as well as the many different ways that people and things can contribute to our world. (p. 73-74)

She also states, “In relinquishing the very human tendency toward an egocentric focus, persons with humility become ever more open to recognizing the abilities, potential, worth, and importance of others” (Tangney, 2000, p. 73).

In contrast to popular views, which tend to see humility as self-deprecation, the Bible holds it in high regard and relates humility to wisdom and fear of the Lord. For example, “The fear of the LORD is instruction in wisdom, and humility goes before honor” (Prov. 15:33, NRSV); “The reward for humility and fear of the LORD is riches and honor and life” (Prov. 22:4, NRSV); “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” (Col. 3:12, NRSV).

Therefore, the introduction of an approach from the perspective of cultural humility provides opportunities for critique and reflection and infuses in students the desire to establish relationships with others who are different, being open to learning from them. Because there is wisdom in humility, students are free to consider themselves fallible and in a process of becoming more knowledgeable; they can begin to think globally and leave their parochial views



behind.

### **“Foreign Failures Spark Learning”**

So read the title of a section in *The Beacon* ([February 15, 2013, p. 6](#)), the student newspaper of Northwestern College. In it, the writer invited students to “embrace failure,” the first comforting words she received about living in a new country. As an example, she shared the following experience, “Thanks to a slip of the tongue, I accidentally called my host mom a pig within the first two hours of knowing her.”

It is important to take into account that most Northwestern students grew up in a protected environment and are accustomed to being rewarded for almost any good thing they do, even if it is average. They need to have a sense of success. Letters and badges are awarded often and in abundance over the school years. The word “fail” is absent in school vocabulary; it was replaced by “needs improvement” or “does not meet expectations.” In addition, parents often overprotect their children and, although students are part of a very individualistic culture, they are not as independent as they think. Because of their sheltered upbringing, they tend to be less resilient. It is a fact that the percentage of college students affected by anxiety and depression rose slightly but steadily in the last six years (Collegiate Mental Health Data, 2016).

Furthermore, most students get used to relating competence with proficiency through the employ of checklists of skills or subjects covered, something they started doing in high school or previous educational levels as well. Being culturally competent could mean just getting some basic knowledge about the other culture and noting its main characteristics. However, there is danger associated with checklists, since they constitute a reductionist

generalization, especially when referring to culture. Persons are more complex than series of traits, likewise the cultures they represent. In addition, lists refer to ethnic groups in general without considering people in their uniqueness. They also appear to be static, with scarce consideration of changing dynamics. Hence, the notion of being culturally competent could be misinterpreted if focusing only in knowing about the other culture and its main characteristics.

Some of the frustrations expressed by students in previous academic years referred to, among other things, “strange” food, lack of linguistic ability, and inability to manage cultural differences:

- *A big challenge for me is the food. There are meals I don't like and the family says I eat nothing. The lady of the house prepared a strange vegetable that looked “mysterious.” I didn't like it at all (2013).*
- *I am frustrated with how fast people speak. I feel I am back in my first year Spanish because I can understand so little. I believe the family is frustrated with me as well because they need to speak very slowly when they talk to me (2013).*
- *It was hard for me to have an attitude to learn. I had to face that I could not survive by myself in a culture different from mine...I wanted to be fluent in Spanish, and each joke about my Spanish, even in a friendly tone, reminded me that I was short of reaching my goal. In addition, I always had been a good student and was not accustomed to fail (2014).*

As expressed above, it is common to experience negative feelings and react with anger or disgust when being in a culture we don't understand.

Isabel Allende in *Mi País Inventado* (2004) states that every folk has its own customs, fixations, complexes, and the like (p. 62). We know our own idiosyncrasies so we are able to anticipate other people’s reactions and to understand the meaning of gestures, silences, polite phrases, and ambiguity. We feel at ease and know that we fit socially because we have learned how to behave.

However, growth only can occur if the person opens herself to the opportunity of learning, receiving from the other, and accepting differences. Thus, humility allows us to acknowledge our own limitations and to appreciate different ways of doing things.

We seek in humility to cultivate a receptive spirit, note Larson and Shady (2017) because we recognize that “signs of divine truth may show up in surprising places...” Furthermore, humility functions as an antidote to bias and misunderstanding.

### **Adding an Approach Based on Cultural Humility**

Students in previous semesters arrived at positive conclusions about the host culture and learned to appreciate their experiences abroad, as can be appreciated in following comments:

- *I think of the story of Mary and Martha. In my culture, I am always trying to do things and be perfect. Here, the culture gives more value to spending time with other people and listening to them* (2014).
- *I learned to receive hospitality and love. I learned the importance of allowing others the opportunity to serve instead of always being the person serving... [W]e need to allow others the opportunity of receiving the blessing that comes from giving* (2013).
- *When I attended church one typical Sunday...something blew my mind. We have a great God. He has many characteristics, for example, He is a God of love, of justice,*

*of mercy, and many other things. Then I realized He is the God of languages. The world is filled with God’s children and they have different cultures and ethnicities. There is so much diversity among God’s children! (2013)*

The addition of readings on humility and cultural humility from the beginning of the preparation course helped participants to reflect, self-evaluate, and anticipate difficulties awaiting them on their study abroad experiences, perceiving those as opportunities for learning and growth.

As in 2016, the first reading included in the preparation course in the spring semester of 2017 was an article focusing on cultural humility, its definition, and its importance for intercultural relations. Most reflections prompted by the reading mentioned the need of being flexible, being humble when relating to others, considering people more important than things, having a desire to learn, and being able to acknowledge one’s mistakes. For example, here are some of the comments:

- *The capacity to be sensitive, intelligent and humble is very important to learn about culture and people without being judgmental or negative. I need those qualities because I want to learn a lot, be culturally intelligent and have a healthy and balanced experience.*
- *If you have a humble attitude, probably other people will be willing to relate to you.*
- *Humility shows you are grateful for the things others provide, and also that you have the desire to learn about their culture.*

Later, I incorporated three short readings on spiritual practices for cultivating humility. Those readings contributed to focus on fears or afflictions as opportunities for letting God

manifest His power in our lives. Comments expressed by the students highlighted their identification with most issues mentioned in the short texts:

- *The article was important because now I know that fears can be used for a better end, and that humility is essential to this process.*
- *Nobody expects that I will be perfect. Through my fears I can learn how to trust in God and cultivate the value of humility.*
- *I was reminded that God would help me abroad as He does here in every situation.*
- *Humility = I can't but God can. Acknowledging God's power and that I cannot do it on my own.*
- *Humility = I acknowledge my mistakes and weaknesses, and put my trust in God.*
- *Silence is a good practice. Often we talk to Jesus, but don't make time to listen to Him.*

Afterward, we examined Tangney's key elements of humility. In one of the activities proposed, students needed to provide two or three short phrases based on the text that could be helpful when in difficult or confusing situations while being abroad. Some of the comments collected were as follow:

- *Show me the way you do it.*
- *Can you help me with this?*
- *Can you explain it to me?*
- *It is important to recognize differences and strengths in each person because everyone is God's creature.*

Finally, we read excerpts from Larson and Shady’s book (2017) *From Bubble to Bridge: Educating Christians for a Multifaith World*, which referred to receptive humility, reflective commitment, and imaginative empathy. Later, they had to list five principles that would help them the following semester. Some aspects mentioned were the following:

- *I need to listen to others when they talk about their life and their family.*
- *I need to have an open mind when I am talking to someone.*
- *I need to remember humility. I don’t know everything, and can learn from everyone.*
- *I need to take time to reflect about my experiences.*
- *I need to make friends.*
- *We all are neighbors—some need help and others can offer it.*
- *I need to think first of others, and be patient with others and myself.*
- *I need to ask myself everyday, how am I going to love my neighbor today?*

For the conclusion of the preparation course, students needed to reflect about what they had learned in a final project. Humility was one of the topics to consider. One student commented,

*I believe humility as well as trust and respect are very important aspects. This semester taught me the importance of humility not only when I travel abroad but also in my daily life (2017).*

Another wrote:

*For me, the most important topic was humility: we cannot enter a new culture and shine for Christ if we are not humble. If we think we know everything and don’t need any help,*

*we won't be good models and will fail in our mission of learning and having an open mind (2017).*

### **Examples from Students' Reflective Journals during the Semester Abroad, Fall 2016**

During the first week in the host country, students reflected about their first impressions and how an attitude of cultural humility helped them during that period. Examples of the answers received follow:

- *It helped me in my first week with my new family since I was prepared to encounter differences. I needed to observe and ask questions for understanding better about expected behavior, food, and worship customs.*
- *It helped me with my first reactions, because I was able to face new things with a positive attitude and was ready to accept differences.*
- *It helped me to experience every new thing with a positive perspective.*

In all reflective journals during the semester abroad, students had the opportunity to consider other aspects of cultural humility, like having an open and receptive mind, ability to acknowledge one's mistakes, openness to new ideas, keeping oneself in proper perspective, etc., besides questions related to the books read during the preparation course and their faith life.

In their final project, students reflected about their experiences during the entire semester abroad, how they grew through them and what they learned about themselves, the culture of the host country, and their calling to pursue God's redeeming work in the world. Comments about humility were present in all their papers:

- *Cultural humility was very important during my time in Costa Rica in order to show respect and appreciation for the culture. I experienced many cultural differences and*

*suffered culture shock. It would have been easy to reject those differences and follow my own customs and cultural values...*

- *Being culturally humble was beneficial during my transition to the new country. Without a humble attitude, I wouldn't have had experiences with such a powerful impact on my life and wouldn't have had the quality of relationships I attained with my host families and other people I met during the semester.*
- *For me, humility was important for adjusting to the host culture. Adjusting was necessary in order to spend four months away from home. I had to recognize what were the things of my home culture that I really loved and those I didn't like. When I was able to do so, I started appreciating the Spanish culture.*
- *Humility was necessary for admitting the bad aspects of my own culture and valuing the good in the other. When I was humble, I was able to mix good aspects of both cultures and let them have a positive influence in my life.*
- *God taught me many things through the experience of studying a semester in Spain. But first He taught me about cultural humility and its value in a cross-cultural context. It was essential for learning and maturing.*
- *One needs to maintain a humble attitude to be able to appreciate and accept the differences found in other countries. Instead of judging or comparing, one needs to be open to a new perspective in each cross-cultural context. Furthermore, it is important to seek opportunities to learn from the people around. This experience taught me that each person has a story, and taking the time to know her, to listen to her story, and to build a relationship is one of the most valuable things anyone can do. Learning from*



*other people and trying to build authentic relationships have the power of enriching one's own life.*

## **Conclusion**

In *Bread for the Journey* Henri Nouwen (2006) observed the following about listening: Listening is much more than allowing another to talk while waiting for a chance to respond. Listening is paying full attention to others and welcoming them into our very beings. The beauty of listening is that those who are listened to start feeling accepted, start taking their words more seriously and discovering their true selves. Listening is a form of spiritual hospitality by which you invite strangers to become friends, to get to know their inner selves more fully, and even to dare to be silent with you (March 11 entry).

Through the material addressing cultural humility introduced in my preparation courses, we learned that humility encourages listening with an open mind, to be receptive to the other and welcome her presence, to appreciate other peoples' ideas and advice, to learn from the stranger.

All comments and journals collected during last semesters demonstrated that adding reflective activities based on readings about cultural humility helped students to feel better prepared for their semester abroad and to adjust more easily to new experiences in the host country.

I want to finish quoting the rest of the student's blog entry, the one that started this paper:  
*...Even though I wasn't able to talk directly with him, I keep thinking about that man – his sweet, gentle spirit and how precious that time was sitting with him in a circle in the middle of the street. All of these little moments God used to show me how important it is*

*to take the time to get to **KNOW** other people and **BE** known by other people. Being known, or even knowing that other people care enough to want get to know you, is a desire that is written in everyone’s heart. We were made to thrive on authentic human relationships and interaction... (2016)*

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