

Theory Applications: Contact Theory / Contact Hypothesis / Intergroup Contact

Introduction and Background

The University prides itself on the strides it has made in internationalizing its campus. The institution has close to 12% international students on its U.S. campus in both the short-term ESL program and the traditional undergraduate schools. The cultures and countries represented on campus continue to diversify, and the administrators are excited about the possibilities for intercultural activities and learning. The number of faculty-led study abroad programs to locations in Europe, Africa, and Asia has increased, and returning students are expected to participate in the developing international programming efforts on campus. And, through some interesting exchange agreements, the number of international faculty on campus this year has increased as well.

In prior years one of the most popular activities on campus and in the community has been the International Night dinner and entertainment. In the past the International Student Association and the Student Activities organization always cosponsored the event. This would guarantee the faculty advisors of both clubs, one of whom was an international himself, would at least do part of the planning with the students and student life staff, and regular planning meetings took place throughout the term. This academic year the administration was supporting a new model with smaller, but more frequent, cultural evenings on campus. So far the Spanish and Asian nights had been quite successful, and the first night of the winter term, French night, was fast approaching. The planning committee for this event included ESL students from France who were at the university for an 8-week program, undergraduate students from several of the francophone countries in Africa, and returning U.S. students who had been studying in Montreal, Canada for the Fall term.

The Incident

As the event grew closer, the planning committee found the stress of rushing through meetings, different levels of language mastery, and academic pressures made the meetings difficult. The faculty participation was uneven, and the students didn't always know how to resolve differences in opinion. Most of the students had not been a part of these types of activities before this year; some had never even seen one before.

On the evening of the event the food was wonderful, the French poetry melodic, and the music and fashion show representative of the many French-influenced cultures participating. The relief and excitement of the planning committee as the night wore on was palpable. As the last performer was completing her act, the French ESL students were so excited they jumped onto the stage, and carrying a French flag they burst into a rousing rendition of the French national anthem. The audience cheered, as the remaining members of the planning committee fled the room in anger. The faculty advisors looked at each other in dismay, wondering how they would approach their next meeting.

Case questions to consider:

- 1- What were the perspectives of the various members of the planning committee leading up to the event and how might that have influenced their view of and participation in the event?
- 2- Why might the singing of the national anthem have angered other members of the committee?
- 3- How might the faculty advisors and other administrators now intervene to turn this event into a "teachable moment" for the students on the committee and the student body as a whole?

- 4- What might have been done from the beginning of the planning for the event to maximize its potential as a learning activity?

Analysis

There are many perspectives from which to view this case for a careful analysis. If using the contact hypothesis as the basis for analyzing and responding to the case questions, there are certain conditions that should be met. This hypothesis states that several conditions must be met in order for program participants to reduce their prejudices against members of other groups. These are 1) equal status, 2) common goals, 3) cooperation, and 4) authority sanction for the event.

On the surface it appears the stakeholders in this event fell into the three broad categories of students, faculty, and administrators. This suggests there was *equal status* among the participants. But if we look more closely this is not really the case. The students are distinguished by country of origin and the historical connections between them, command of the instructional language, understanding of U.S. and campus culture, and length of time on campus. The hierarchical relationship of faculty and administrators to the students and to each other is also at work here. What decisions concerning the staging of this event were really to be made by the students, and did they understand that throughout the planning and implementation of the event?

Contact theory suggests the participants need to have *common goals* in order to diminish prejudice between groups. It is not at all clear if all the members of the planning committee were in agreement about what they wanted to accomplish with this event. We also do not know if the expectations of their advisors and the administration were or were not shared. The only participants who had witnessed and helped with the new model were the students who had been on campus during the Fall term.

There was obviously *cooperation* among the planning committee— at least to some extent. However, as the event date moved closer, the level of cooperation became strained. And the incident of the anthem and flag makes the understanding supporting this cooperation questionable. So, had all members of the planning committee truly committed to “shared values” about their French heritage or experience and what of this they wanted the wider audience to understand?

The administration believed the new model of cultural nights would support the development of a more international community. As the ultimate authority in this setting, this part of the message was clear. But for those new or returning to the campus, this support may not have been as obvious as it needed to be. And, the inconsistent attendance of the faculty advisors may have sent a mixed message as well. As the prior planning became more difficult, additional support and training in multicultural, team skill building may have helped and sent a stronger message of *authority sanction and support*.

Responding to the Case Questions

Having used the “contact theory lenses” to analyze how this incident occurred helps to explain the incident and provide answers to the case questions above. How might we use these tenets of this theory to construct a more productive intercultural planning committee? And, what are the several possible community activities that might be planned to maximize the learning and understanding of the event?

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