

INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL CONCERNS

COMMUNITY CASES

CULTURAL CREDIBILITY – INTERSECTIONS OF IDENTITY

SUMMARY: Exploring how different aspects of identity can contribute to cultural credibility.

CASE TYPE: Reflective

Reflective cases are internally oriented. These cases invite reflection on one's own place in community engaged work. They typically will not have clear 'right' answers and are open to many interpretations.

FOCUS AREAS	LEARNING OBJECTIVES
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cultural Credibility• Identity• Power Dynamics	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Reflect on the conflicting realities often present when building cultural credibility2. Discuss the potentials around cultural credibility in their own immersive experiences3. Explore the challenges to identity, belonging, and power dynamics inherent in considerations of cultural credibility4. Prepare for the ethical considerations inherent in power dynamics around cultural credibility

SCENARIO

Corey and Peter are both juniors studying mechanical engineering. As part of a summer student-teaching program, they have been assigned to co-teach an introductory engineering seminar at a secondary school in Ghana. Corey is Ghanaian-American, born in the United States and raised in Virginia. His father moved from Ghana to the United States for college, and married his mother, an African-American woman, after graduation. All through his life he's heard his father's stories about growing up in Ghana, and he is incredibly excited to be in this place that holds so much meaning in his mind; a place he feels is part of his heritage. Peter is a white American, also from Virginia, who has lived his whole life in the US, and is most excited about the placement because he will get to experience a new part of the world.

Corey and Peter spend an intense two weeks before their departure working together to prepare a meaningful curriculum. They work well as a team, and are excited to take on this challenge together. Soon after arriving, they join the headmaster for an introductory meeting. He opens by saying, "We've had a great experience with all our American student partners, we're excited to have you both here." He makes similar remarks throughout, referring to Corey and Peter as "the Americans." Corey leaves feeling a bit annoyed. He was hoping there would be some acknowledgement of his shared heritage, which he knows the headmaster is aware of.

Undeterred, Corey is excited for the first day of classes the following week. Monday morning finds Corey and Peter standing nervously in front of their class. Peter and Corey's introductions are identical - both students, in the same class year, at the same university, from the same state, and in the same major. Corey notes his Ghanaian heritage at the end, hoping to connect more with the students.

After class, the boys all rush to the front to talk more with their new teachers. After the basic pleasantries, Corey notices all the boys gravitating to Peter. He doesn't think much of it at first, but over the course of the week, this becomes a clear pattern. He starts to see some subtle changes in Peter, too. Peter is clearly recognizing that his novelty as a white American is providing him with a privileged position in the school. The boys want to be around him all the time, and even the other teachers seem to take his opinion more seriously. Corey can see Peter enjoying the attention, and isn't sure if he should address it with Peter directly. In the end, Corey is feeling doubly betrayed. Not only have his hopes for cultural connection around his Ghanaian heritage come up short, it seems he's not even being recognized as an American or as a knowledgeable engineering student.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Consider the varying perspectives:
 - a. Why might Corey be feeling the way he is?
 - b. Why might the students be reacting as they are? The headmaster?
 - c. How do you think Peter is feeling?
2. Corey describes feeling "doubly betrayed" - by the community he hoped to connect with and by Peter. Unpack each layer of that feeling.
 - a. Are they the same kind of disappointment?
 - b. Are they meaningfully different?
 - c. Is either warranted?
3. If you were Corey, how might you think about moving forward in a constructive way?
4. Do you think real connection around shared heritage is possible? If so, what might it look like here?
5. Peter finds himself in a common, but unanticipated position. Often, foreigners, especially those who look different, find themselves facing unexpected admiration or recognition.
 - a. How might this impact someone, especially if they have not been in this situation before?
 - b. What are the challenges inherent in this power dynamic?
 - c. What might someone like Peter need to do to maintain appropriate boundaries and foster authentic partnership?
6. If you were Peter, what might you do next to foster authentic relationships and community engagement?
7. Open communication in these situations is challenging and can be awkward. How would you advise Corey and Peter to go about discussing something like this?

FACILITATOR CONSIDERATIONS

- EXPLORE INTENT AND IMPACT. Challenge students to think from the perspective of others. This situation is caught up in so many concepts: identity, belonging, power dynamics, culture, perception, etc. Examining the underlying intent can help to understand and respond to impact.
- NAME UNCOMFORTABLE REALITIES. Students might not be aware of dynamics like the one outlined above for Peter. But many of them will find themselves in similar situations if they are in international settings. This is an awkward reality to acknowledge, but students need to be thinking now about how to create boundaries, foster authentic partnership, and act correctly within power dynamics.
- NORMALIZE DISCOMFORT. Acknowledge that immersive experiences can often bring different communities together and that this can sometimes create dissonance or confusion.

CLOSING QUESTIONS

- What's one thing you learned or thought about differently during this discussion?
- Thinking about any upcoming immersive experiences, in what ways do you think you might have or lack cultural credibility? What are the challenges or opportunities that might come from this reality?