

Engaging In Challenging Conversations Abroad

Frank Clark said: “We find comfort among those who agree with us, growth among those who don’t.” When you go abroad, it's inevitable to find yourself in a conversation with someone whose opinions vary greatly from yours. Cross-cultural dialogue is one of the greatest learning opportunities you'll have when you're overseas, so while it might make you uncomfortable, embrace the chance to learn more about yourself and others. How can we find both comfort and growth during conversations that challenge our emotions, friendships, and relationships? Here are a few tips about how to engage in critical, meaningful dialogue with others while you’re abroad.



1) Start with yourself

Maya Angelou said: “If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude.” While you may not be successful in changing how others think, what you can change is your attitude and how you might approach challenging conversations with friends and family. A great way to start is by spending time reflecting on how you identify, what informs your opinions (religion, family, community, etc.) and consider which hot topics trigger an emotional response. Write down your thoughts and expand on why you think or feel the way you do.

Many times these topics are connected to our values; thus, when we find ourselves arguing about these issues, it's because to some extent we feel personally attacked (and sometimes that is true). Understanding your emotional triggers before engaging in a difficult conversation can help you from retorting at an opposing opinion in a negative, unproductive manner. You don't have to accept or reject someone's opinion; but be willing to listen and understand where they're coming from. If you're speaking with friends, family or colleagues, it shouldn't be a lot to ask that they do the same. Mutually agree that this conversation is an invitation to learn about each other's perspectives.

2) Are you listening?

The old adage, "We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak" is still very relevant today. Become an active listener and take note on information that you think needs further clarification. For example, the person you're speaking with might cite statistics or reports that call into question your opinion. If you don't think something sounds correct, be comfortable saying so. Just be sure to criticize ideas, not individuals, and have confidence if you know your sources are factually true. Avoid blame, speculation, or assumptions. One conversation may not resolve the dispute or completely repair your relationship, but progress begins with even the smallest of actions. What you don't want to do is promote ignorance, which can happen if you never speak to someone with opposing opinions, views and perspectives. If you engage in dialogue with people that share different perspectives, listening to their opinions with an open mind is a great place to start.

3) Embrace the Uncomfortable

Don't limit your perspective on another person's reality by only engaging in difficult dialogue with people who share your identity, beliefs, experiences, and opinions. Having uncomfortable conversations with people that have varying opinions from you can teach you a lot about yourself. Personal biases may be exposed on both sides, which gives you and your peer another opportunity to reflect on ideals you believed were "truths" but are false. Practice empathy, which means try to envision yourself in the other person's "shoes" while listening. Sure, it's uncomfortable but discomfort can produce positive change.



4) Stay connected to your network

While being in uncomfortable situations helps us grow, being surrounded by community is what keeps us balanced. We need relationships, love and friendship and life is meaningless without them. Your community can help restore the imbalance of emotions that might have been reignited or created by a particularly exhausting conversation. In the midst of a busy schedule, your community at school and at home can help you thrive, not just survive. There are so many ways to stay connected today, despite any physical distance between you and your community. Here are few ways to stay connected and maintain your well-being:

- Use platforms like Facebook or Skype to speak with friends or family
- Create a playlist of inspiring and encouraging songs then send them to a friend
- Log your experiences and thoughts in a journal
- Join a support group at school (your institution may have a support group based on your identity) and/or utilize the counseling services on your campus
- Volunteer in your community and shift your energy towards a selfless activity
- Research something positive occurring in your community and post it on social media as a #MotivationalMonday post

5) Stay Informed

No matter what your opinions might be, it's so important to stay informed. Here are three ways you can combat ignorance and become a more informed citizen in today's interconnected world:

- Podcasts. Listen to a thought-provoking podcast on those taboo topics of religion and politics. Listening to an opinion on an issue that you agree or disagree with will help prepare you for a in-person discussion on the same topic.
- Follow credible news outlets on social media. Use social media to your advantage, and allow it to inform you of socially responsible trending topics for intellectual growth. News outlets such as NPR frequently provide updates on issues that affect both the local and global community.
- Attend diversity and inclusion events on your campus. Student organizations often invite guest speakers, hosts forums and facilitate round-table discussion on diverse topics. Check your institutions events calendar for more information.

Always remember that facts matter, perspective needs to shift, and knowledge needs to grow. Challenge yourself to both grow and find comfort so that you can become the global leader that this world needs.

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