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# Learning to Put People First

## Cultural Humility, Funds of Knowledge, and Information Literacy Instruction with First-Generation Students

*Darren Ilett*

### Introduction

When I accepted an information literacy (IL) librarian position at a midsize public university four years ago, I was excited to start my new career. I would teach IL courses and one-shot sessions and serve as the liaison for two federally funded TRIO programs that foster the academic success of “low-income individuals, first-generation college students, and individuals with disabilities.”<sup>1</sup> Yet I also felt I had much to prove—to students, colleagues, administrators, and myself. After having failed midpoint tenure review in another field and subsequently weathering six years of under- and unemployment, I viewed this new job as my last chance for success in academia.

Fortunately, I have learned much from TRIO students and from colleagues dedicated to student success. They have helped me move from a self-conscious focus on my own performance to an emphasis instead on cultural humility, learning about students’ lived experiences as assets, and fostering their success. I have begun to recognize some of the harm I have caused as an instructor with mostly privileged

social identities, including white, middle-class, cisgender, and male, who works with students who have mostly minoritized identities, such as first-generation, low-income, and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). In this essay, I share key learning moments in my development as an educator, use the lenses of cultural humility and funds of knowledge to reflect critically on those moments, and share ways I have changed my professional praxis as a consequence.

## Key Learning Moments

Two early experiences in my current position challenged my approach to teaching. Part of my approach was to “catch” students in “bad” behavior. I worried that common student behaviors—looking at cell phones, working on assignments from other classes, missing class, and so on—were a referendum on my teaching. To me, they were signs that I was not engaging enough and that students were not taking the material seriously. I feared that students would “get away with” not preparing for class or learning course content. This approach demanded constant vigilance. It was exhausting for me and hurtful to students.

The first key learning moment unsettled this perspective. I was moving about the classroom, checking on students during a group activity. I stopped at Miguel’s (a pseudonym) group and said, “Oh, *now* you’re watching the video! That was homework.” My intention was to manage time and improve future behavior by signaling that I noticed the group’s lack of preparation. As I turned away, Miguel muttered, “*baboso!*” (idiot, creep). I turned back around, laughed, and asked incredulously what he had said. Fortunately, Miguel was willing to share why he was angry. I had insulted his group by assuming they were unprepared. Not only was I mistaken, my comment also echoed a history of racist and classist abuse. “Everyone always thinks we’re bad students,” he told me. This comment stuck with me. I had been thinking only of my own perspective and had not considered my impact on students. I was not thinking consciously about my own social identities as a white, cisgender, male professor or their identities as low-income, first-generation, BIPOC students when I made the comment, but both played a central role in the students’ experience of the incident. My tendency toward control and not letting any “misbehavior” go unremarked alienated students, reinforced stereotypes about BIPOC students, and sent the message that they did not belong in college, whether or not they did their work. I was harming the very people I had been hired to support. Miguel’s willingness to share his perspective was an invaluable gift that made me aware of some of the impact I had on students.

A second learning moment came a year later when Jennifer (a pseudonym) missed several class sessions and deadlines. She also appeared withdrawn from classmates. I knew she had recently joined the TRIO program, while the others had bonded the previous semester. Several times I asked how she was doing, offered help, and

encouraged her to attend TRIO events. She dismissed my concerns, insisting everything was all right. Eventually, I discovered an obstacle in our communication: me. I did not understand her research interest, namely the role of internalized misogyny in women's perpetuation of sexism. I arrogantly assumed and therefore perceived only ignorance and confusion because Jennifer's description of her project was not packaged in academic language. My default lens was deficit thinking,<sup>2</sup> and it caused me to overlook Jennifer's complex and important research topic and the intellectual contribution she could make based on lived experience. My dismissiveness and frustration were steeped in the sexism, racism, and classism typical of academia. Once I finally understood and expressed my enthusiasm for her project, Jennifer was also more excited and sought out my help. She also shared some struggles outside of college, including family issues. As with Miguel, Jennifer's continuing willingness to engage with me despite my hurtful behavior was a gift. This incident made me wonder how often I had allowed the elitist, gatekeeping language and conventions of the academy to hinder my understanding of students and consequently limit their ability to pursue their research interests, succeed in my classes, and attain a sense of belonging in college. Jennifer and I developed a level of trust only because she did not give up on me.

As a result of such incidents, I now understand that student behavior usually has little or nothing to do with my performance as a teacher. Instead, it hints at the pressures in their lives: working several jobs, caring for family, and dealing with food and housing insecurity, among many others. Their lives are full and complex; they are much more than students in my class. I now approach students with an eagerness to learn from them in recognition of the fact that I do not know what stressors they are facing, what their cultures are and what role those cultures play in their college experiences, what they have already accomplished, and what they are capable of. When issues arise, my goal is to provide care and support rather than admonishment. I have also switched from deficit thinking to asset-based approaches and assume that students are competent learners, creative thinkers, and effective problem solvers and that they bring to the IL classroom knowledge and skills from their lives outside formal education. This change in perspective often contributes to an improved classroom atmosphere and increased student motivation to learn IL content, as other LIS researchers have also found.<sup>3</sup> Ironically, though I thought I was emphasizing content in the past, my policing of behavior often ignored the students in the room as full human beings, thereby impeding their development of deeper connections with the IL content I cared so much about. My priorities were backward. People have to come first.

## Theory

What I have learned from Miguel, Jennifer, and others aligns with cultural humility. Melanie Tervalon and Jann Murray-García introduced the term in the context of

physician training as a corrective to cultural competence understood narrowly as “an easily demonstrable mastery of a finite body of knowledge.”<sup>4</sup> Instead, cultural humility emphasizes a lifelong process of self-evaluation, addressing power imbalances, and cultivating “mutually beneficial and non-paternalistic partnerships.”<sup>5</sup> Since its emergence over two decades ago, cultural humility has found resonance in such fields as social work and education. Recent explorations of cultural humility in librarianship have deepened my understanding of the concept in my own praxis as an IL librarian.

First, cultural humility has several affective features. David A. Hurley, Sarah R. Kostelecky, and Lori Townsend argue that cultural humility does not consist of self-deprecation—as *humility* might imply—but rather a willingness to engage in accurate self-assessment along with an orientation outward toward other people.<sup>6</sup> It requires a realization that “*my norms aren’t the only norms, and unfamiliar norms aren’t necessarily wrong.*”<sup>7</sup> In addition, cultural humility calls for openness to the importance of culture in an interaction “without anticipating what exactly it will be.”<sup>8</sup> We must accept that we cannot fully know what someone brings to an interaction because each person experiences their culture in unique ways, including the intersection of multiple social identities.<sup>9</sup> Yet not all aspects of one’s identity or culture play equal roles in an interaction, and instead may vary by context.<sup>10</sup> Further, Twanna Hodge argues that we should not reduce people to “their visible group affiliation,” for there may be others of equal or greater significance to them.<sup>11</sup> Cultural humility involves remaining open-minded, avoiding a sense of superiority, acknowledging gaps in one’s knowledge, and seeking to learn rather than instruct.<sup>12</sup>

This can prove challenging for instructors who feel the need to project control. Yet a second aspect of cultural humility is the imperative to identify and redress power imbalances inherent in such controlling approaches. Several LIS authors call for learning about one’s own cultures and biases, as well as the (unconscious) social scripts one follows in interactions.<sup>13</sup> One of my scripts is the need to appear knowledgeable about course content and competent in classroom management. This relates to my insecurities as a new librarian and as a first-generation student myself. However, adherence to this script only compounds my authoritative role in the classroom and places students in a relatively powerless position. When I called out Miguel’s group for apparently not being prepared, I did not consider my own privileged identities and relatively powerful position as their instructor and representative of the library and university.<sup>14</sup>

Third, practicing cultural humility requires that I examine the (unconscious) biases I bring to the classroom. With Miguel’s group, I was focused on time management. However, my implicit bias that BIPOC students, low-income students, and first-generation students are unprepared was at play, even if unconsciously. In addition, we should consider not only our own biases, but also how others see us.<sup>15</sup> As Miguel shared with me, my actions were part of a history of abuse he experienced

with teachers. My role as instructor and my privileged social identities exacerbated the imbalance of power and added to his history of abuse. Hodge calls on us to be “aware that communities suffer from historical trauma.”<sup>16</sup> I had the privilege of ignoring the power imbalance and remaining unaware of his history of trauma, but Miguel did not. Yet cultural humility calls on us to pay attention and learn, even and especially when it proves difficult. It involves identifying our own biases and scripts, considering how others may see us, avoiding stereotyping, and not reducing people to their visible social identities.<sup>17</sup>

A fourth aspect of cultural humility is relationship building.<sup>18</sup> The affective features, consideration of power dynamics, and self-evaluation described above help create the foundation for mutually beneficial relationships. However, Hodge also urges us to honor what people bring to an interaction and to meet people where they are rather than where we expect them to be.<sup>19</sup> These aspects of cultural humility resonate with another pedagogical approach, namely funds of knowledge. Norma González, Luis C. Moll, and Cathy Amanti write that the term “is based on a simple premise: People are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge.”<sup>20</sup> Though originally practiced in elementary education, funds of knowledge can also serve as a strong foundation for further learning in college.<sup>21</sup> For example, if I had encouraged Jennifer to share and explore the funds of knowledge she developed outside of college, I could have better understood her proposed research topic relating to her lived experience. Discussing and building on students’ funds of knowledge demonstrates that who they are and what they know matters in college-level learning. Furthermore, valuing students’ funds of knowledge can help redress power imbalances by including their input when selecting course content. Learning from students and sharing our own funds of knowledge can help foster more reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationships in the classroom and therefore aligns with cultural humility.

## Praxis

My interactions with students, critical reflection, and engagement with research have informed several changes in how I show up in the classroom and how I structure IL instruction. First, I work to redress power imbalances in the classroom by including students in decisions about what and how we learn together. Using an online discussion board, students in my credit courses provide anonymous input about course policies regarding attendance, class participation, and late work. I make this first step anonymous to encourage them to share openly. Then we decide on the policies together, giving them ownership over course policies.

In credit courses, students also nominate topics and vote on them in a March-Madness-style bracket.<sup>22</sup> The winning topic becomes the example throughout the

course. Students serve as research consultants to develop a research question, search for sources, identify themes in the literature, and so on. We find solutions to challenges together. Recently, students chose vaccines as the topic, and we narrowed it to the medical field's historical and continuing abuse and neglect of Black communities and the consequent impact on COVID-19 vaccination rates. Students display enthusiasm when they are actively involved in decisions affecting their learning and can choose topics relating to their lived experiences.<sup>23</sup> Activities like this position students as experts and capable members of the college community, just as they are outside school.

A second aspect of cultural humility, building relationships, is equally important. At the beginning of credit courses students complete a confidential online survey about their research experience, interests, and responsibilities outside of college. They can also tell me their name (if different from the one in the roster), their pronouns, and anything else they would like to share. In one-shot instruction sessions, I employ a similar activity using online discussion boards with fewer questions. The information allows me to gauge students' research experience, assist them in developing research topics, and understand their stressors outside of college. It also shows that I care about them as people. Since relationships are reciprocal, I share similar information about myself to serve as a model and build trust.

Additionally, in credit classes students check in with each other about how they are dealing with stress, keeping in touch with family, and doing in their lives generally. At these times, I also share my own challenges. We brainstorm strategies for time management, self-care, and other life areas. Such activities build community and normalize both struggling and help-seeking.

Another strategy for building community in both credit classes and one-shot sessions is to dedicate class sessions to family members, friends, coaches, or teachers. Students share how someone supported them or helped them get to college. This honors their social networks, which is particularly important for first-generation students who often experience tension between college and home.<sup>24</sup> I also share about my own experiences as a first-generation student and dedicate class sessions to my sister who inspired and supported me to go to college.

A third aspect of cultural humility and also funds of knowledge is to build on what students bring to college. In credit courses and one-shot sessions, students brainstorm issues relating to their lives at the level of family, community, the US, and the world. I share examples from my own life, including being bullied for being gay in a conservative town in Oregon, working in my father's carpentry shop as a child, and being a first-generation student. Sharing how my identities inform my current research demonstrates that lived experiences and identities are valid foundations for research. Recently, students pursued projects related to their identities and future careers: a business major conducted a project on Latina entrepreneurs, and an education major researched first-generation students and barriers to higher education.

Another strategy in credit courses and one-shot sessions is to encourage students to use information sources they are already aware of. Students frequently interview friends, family, or community members. One student found YouTube interviews with Deaf students about their school experiences because published research excluded their perspectives. If students are encouraged to build on their funds of knowledge, including sources of information outside typical IL curricula, they often choose to do so, are more motivated to complete research projects, and experience more meaningful learning.<sup>25</sup>

Making inclusion and equity a central part of my own and my library's professional praxis requires ongoing commitment. Several practices help hold me accountable, another important feature of cultural humility.<sup>26</sup> I regularly journal after teaching, particularly regarding inclusion and equity issues. An area of improvement for me would be to include questions about equity and inclusion when I ask students for feedback on IL instruction. Colleagues and I observe each other's sessions and give feedback on whatever aspect the respective instructor has chosen to focus on, such as encouraging discussion among students or incorporating diverse topics and information sources. With the aim of encouraging candid dialogue, participation is voluntary and not tied to performance reviews. On an institutional level, my department holds regular meetings where we take turns choosing readings and leading discussions on inclusion and equity topics. These are held off campus and not related to performance reviews to foster a brave space to challenge each other and be honest in self-evaluation. My library also holds professional development sessions on inclusion and equity issues. I led a session on funds of knowledge, and colleagues and I are discussing a future session on cultural humility. In these ways, we make working toward inclusion and equity an integral and ongoing part of our individual and collective professional praxis.

## Conclusion

A combination of key learning moments with students, self-reflection, and exploring inclusive and equitable theories has helped me begin putting people first instead of concerns about course content and behavior. I encourage IL librarians to remain open to learning from the difficult, messy moments when we inadvertently cause students harm. Rather than castigating ourselves, we can use those moments to learn how to work with students more equitably by honoring who they are and what they contribute to our shared learning. Inclusive and equitable approaches such as cultural humility and funds of knowledge provide IL librarians practices we can engage in to work toward those goals.



# Notes

1. US Department of Education, Federal TRIO Programs home page, last modified July 23, 2021, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/index.html>.
2. Richard R. Valencia, *Dismantling Contemporary Deficit Thinking* (New York: Routledge, 2010), chap. 1, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203853214>.
3. Amanda L. Folk, “Drawing on Students’ Funds of Knowledge: Using Identity and Lived Experience to Join the Conversation in Research Assignments,” *Journal of Information Literacy* 12, no. 2 (December 2018): 44–59, <https://doi.org/10.11645/12.2.2468>; Kim L. Morrison, “Informed Asset-Based Pedagogy: Coming Correct, Counter-stories from an Information Literacy Classroom,” *Library Trends* 66, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 176–218, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2017.0034>.
4. Melanie Tervalon and Jann Murray-García, “Cultural Humility versus Cultural Competence: A Critical Distinction in Defining Physician Training Outcomes in Multicultural Education,” *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved* 9, no. 2 (1998): 118, <https://doi.org/10.1353/hpu.2010.0233>.
5. Tervalon and Murray-García, “Cultural Humility,” 123.
6. David A. Hurley, Sarah R. Kostelecky, and Lori Townsend, “Cultural Humility in Libraries,” *Reference Services Review* 47, no. 4 (2019): 548, <https://doi.org/10.1108/RSR-06-2019-0042>.
7. Hurley, Kostelecky, and Townsend, “Cultural Humility in Libraries,” 549.
8. Hurley, Kostelecky, and Townsend, “Cultural Humility in Libraries,” 550.
9. Elizabeth Foster, “Cultural Competence in Library Instruction: A Reflective Practice Approach,” *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 18, no. 3 (2018): 579, <https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2018.0034>.
10. Hurley, Kostelecky, and Townsend, “Cultural Humility in Libraries,” 551.
11. Twanna Hodge, “Integrating Cultural Humility into Public Services Librarianship,” *International Information and Library Review* 51, no. 3 (2019): 271, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10572317.2019.1629070>.
12. Hodge, “Integrating Cultural Humility,” 271; Hurley, Kostelecky, and Townsend, “Cultural Humility in Libraries,” 549; Foster, “Cultural Competence in Library Instruction,” 580.
13. Xan Y. Goodman and Ruby L. Nugent, “Teaching Cultural Competence and Cultural Humility in Dental Medicine,” *Medical Reference Services Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (2020): 318, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02763869.2020.1826183>; Hodge, “Integrating Cultural Humility,” 269; Hurley, Kostelecky, and Townsend, “Cultural Humility in Libraries,” 553; Rajesh Singh, “Promoting Civic Engagement through Cultivating Culturally Competent Self-Reflexive Information Professionals,” *Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association* 69, no. 3 (2020): 313, <https://doi.org/10.1080/24750158.2020.177635>; Julie Winkelstein, “Social Justice in Action: Cultural Humility, Scripts, and the LIS Classroom,” in *Teaching for Justice: Implementing Social Justice in the LIS Classroom*, ed. Nicole A. Cooke and Miriam E. Sweeney (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2017), 153.
14. Winkelstein, “Social Justice in Action,” 155.
15. Hodge, “Integrating Cultural Humility,” 269.
16. Hodge, “Integrating Cultural Humility,” 271.
17. Hurley, Kostelecky, and Townsend, “Cultural Humility in Libraries,” 550; Hodge, “Integrating Cultural Humility,” 271.
18. Foster, “Cultural Competence in Library Instruction,” 580; Goodman and Nugent, “Teaching Cultural Competence,” 319; Tervalon and Murray-García, “Cultural Humility versus Cultural Competence,” 123.
19. Hodge, “Integrating Cultural Humility,” 271, 273.
20. Norma González, Luis C. Moll, and Cathy Amanti, preface in *Funds of Knowledge*, ed. Norma

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21. Cecilia Rios-Aguilar and Judy Marquez Kiyama, “Introduction: The Need for a Funds of Knowledge Approach in Higher Education Contexts,” in *Funds of Knowledge in Higher Education: Honoring Students’ Cultural Experiences and Resources as Strengths*, ed. Judy Marquez Kiyama and Cecilia Rios-Aguilar (New York: Routledge, 2018), 5.
  22. Darren Ilett, “Course Topic Bracket Lesson Plan,” Open Educational Resources, Information Literacy, no. 25, University of Northern Colorado, June 2021, <https://digscholarship.unco.edu/infolit/25/>.
  23. Folk, “Drawing on Students’ Funds of Knowledge,” 54–56.
  24. Rashné Rustom Jehangir, *Higher Education and First-Generation Students* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 21–24; Lee Ward, Michael J. Siegel, and Zebulun Davenport, *First-Generation College Students* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 73–74.
  25. Folk, “Drawing on Students’ Funds of Knowledge,” 54–56
  26. Goodman and Nugent, “Teaching Cultural Competence,” 318; Winkelstein, “Social Justice in Action,” 151.

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