Chapter 9
The Philosopher’s Teahouse: Building Intercultural Competency among Students

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter the author discusses The Philosopher’s Teahouse initiative which provides a forum for students across cultures, linguistic backgrounds and disciplines to dialogue on current social issues and learn from each other’s cultural perspectives, thereby building relationships of inclusion and empowerment. The author explores the research and theoretical framework that informed The Teahouse, including an explanation of critical multicultural language pedagogy, the connection between language and power and how critical multicultural language pedagogy addresses these issues. She discusses how she applied the theory to establish a student-focused multicultural forum at a Canadian university, outlining the objectives, past themes, the organizational process involved and the impact of the program on students and faculty. She ends the chapter with an analysis of the challenges and implications of The Teahouse in preparing students for equal and active participation in a pluralistic society.
INTRODUCTION

Most international students and English language learners (ELL) complain about the difficulty of integrating with local students on campus. This negatively impacts the development of their linguistic and critical thinking skills as well as their acculturation into campus life and Canadian society. In addition, many Canadian students are unaware of the rich culture, knowledge and experience ELLs could contribute to the university. In this chapter the author discusses The Philosopher’s Teahouse initiative which provides a forum for students across cultures, linguistic backgrounds and disciplines to dialogue on current social issues and learn from each other’s cultural perspectives, thereby building relationships of inclusion and empowerment. The author explores the research and theoretical framework that informed The Teahouse, including an explanation of critical multicultural language pedagogy, the connection between language and power and how critical multicultural language pedagogy addresses these issues. She discusses how she applied the theory to establish a student-focused multicultural forum at a Canadian university, outlining the objectives, past themes, the organizational process involved and the impact of the program on students, faculty and the wider community. She ends the chapter with an analysis of the challenges and implications of The Teahouse in preparing students for equal and active participation in a pluralistic society.

BACKGROUND

The author conducted a study to investigate how immigrant and international students understand and experience critical pedagogy in a culturally diverse English for Academic Purposes (EAP) class in a Western Canadian University. Using a critical ethnographic case study, which took place over one academic year, the findings uncovered the many ways English language learners (ELLs) make meaning of a pedagogical process that has to date received little practical guidance. Methodology involved an analysis of taped dialogues and discussions, homework and class work of 49 students, and in-depth private interviews with 28 of the total participants. The majority of the 49 participants in the study were Asian:

- 31 from the People’s Republic of China (PRC);
- 4 from Hong Kong,
- 3 from Taiwan;
- 3 from South Asia;
- 1 from Korea and
- 1 from Japan.
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