

Case Studies for Intercultural and Conflict Communication

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Edited by

Kelly L. McKay-Semmler

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PREFACE

KELLY MCKAY-SEMMLER

This pedagogical book is an edited compilation of original case studies and accompanying case study teaching plans addressing issues in intercultural and organizational communication and conflict resolution. Case studies are interactive and engaging ways to approach analysis of real world interpersonal and intercultural conflicts. While factual knowledge of theories and concepts is essential in learning about communication, case teaching facilitates mastery of discussion participants' understanding through creating spaces where discussants engage in natural conversations about abstract theories in situated realities.

Case method teaching promotes continual engagement with content for both case learners and case facilitators. Unlike many other forms of instruction, a single case study can become a dynamic teaching tool that can be adapted to teaching different classes or conducting different trainings with different kinds of learners. Although the narrative of the case may remain the same, each time it is debriefed with a different group, the discussion will go a little (or a lot) differently, which makes case learning a progression in collaborative mystery solving.

In addition to containing a wide variety of case narratives relevant to a broad range of courses and organizational trainings on diversity and managing conflict, an especially unique feature of this collection is the accompanying case teaching plans. Each of the case studies in this collection were developed by graduate students taking courses I taught in managing cultural diversity and conflict resolution. Students were instructed to utilize the guidelines for case writing provided by Swiercz (n.d.) and to prepare to facilitate discussion of their case studies with their classmates using recommendations from Wasserman (1994), which include advance preparation of a detailed teaching plan to guide learners through the debriefing process. Thus, while case teachers utilizing this collection have the liberty to develop their own discussion questions and activities around any given case, they also have the scaffolding of suggested reading materials and pre-developed questions specifically crafted by the individual case authors to facilitate discussion of each case. As the case studies were

developed in commonly taught communication courses, they draw heavily upon concepts and theories that will be familiar to instructors and organizational trainers, as well as complement the primary texts used in these settings.

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SECTION 1:

**ETHICS AND POLITICS
IN MULTICULTURAL SOCIETIES**

CHAPTER 1

THE RAMP TO CHANGE

KARA BRODSKY

A young Russian college student tries to make change in her country for those who are physically disabled.

Home country

Anna entered the convention center with a stomach full of butterflies. They weren't nervous butterflies, but excited ones. Anna is a media student from the capital city of Russia: Moscow. For the first time, her university was hosting an international conference for undergraduate media and journalism students. She was excited to meet others from around the world and learn from their experiences. She was also excited to share the work that she had done. In the last year, Anna helped make a digital series shedding light on the lack of handicap accessible buildings in her country. Anna has been in a wheelchair for as long as she can remember because she was born with a disability that made her legs unfunctional. The buildings in Russia are old and most of them do not have ramps or elevators. Anna wanted this to change, so, as a social journalist, she took the lead on the project. She was proud of the work she had done, but she hadn't seen any change yet. There wasn't a lot she could do except bring awareness to the issue at hand, so she hoped that other students would give her hope for the future. Maybe their countries had made this change in order to help those who are physically disabled.

As Anna circled the bustling room, she greeted her fellow classmates and smiled at a few new faces. In order to mix up the groups, they were given assigned seats at round tables with students from other countries. Anna quickly realized all of the tables had attached benches that wrapped around the entire circumference, making them inaccessible for her and her wheelchair. Anna felt embarrassed as she moved toward her table where there were five other students sitting down. She wasn't sure what to do. Although able to speak English, she felt self-conscious about her accent,

and not always knowing the exact words to use. Nevertheless, using what she knew, she introduced herself.

“Hello, I’m Anna. I think I’m sitting at this table with you.”

A young lady with curly brown hair perked up and said, “Oh, hi! I’m McKenzie! It’s so nice to meet you.”

It didn’t take long for McKenzie to realize Anna’s predicament. She looked sympathetic but wasn’t sure what to do. As Anna introduced herself to the other students, she noticed McKenzie’s eyes darting around the room. McKenzie quickly got up from the table and disappeared into the crowd. Anna was confused but didn’t worry about it. After a few minutes, Anna was sitting quietly behind the table’s bench, a few feet away from any of the other students at her table, when she noticed McKenzie rushing back over with a chair. She positioned it right next to Anna, grabbed her things from the table, and sat down.

“I think I’ll sit with you, if that’s okay,” she said as she gave Anna a soft smile.

Anna couldn’t help but grin. That might have been the nicest thing anyone had ever done for her! As Anna and McKenzie chatted, she realized that where McKenzie was from, a university in the United States, almost everything was handicap accessible. Every building had a ramp and an elevator, and there were even special dorm rooms with more space for students with wheelchairs. It sounded like a dream to Anna. She couldn’t believe a whole university could make that change. Anna told McKenzie about her struggles with handicap accessibility in Russia and that she wanted to make a difference for herself and others with disabilities there.

“If you look around,” Anna explained, “you will not see any ramps. Many of the buildings on campus or around town do not have elevators. My professor’s office is on the third floor, but I cannot get to it. It does not seem like they even know it is an issue.”

“You should come study at my university. You would absolutely love it!” McKenzie exclaimed. “You might even get some ideas for your video series.”

New world

The moment the plane landed in the United States, Anna felt sick to her stomach. What was she doing? She had only been out of Russia a couple times in her life and never by herself. Now she was in a whole new world, and she was alone. She waited as the other passengers filed off of the airplane. It took a while, but she was patient. Then an older gentleman in an airline uniform came down the aisle with a small wheelchair. He pulled up

next to Anna and said, “Good afternoon, miss. This will get you off the plane where your personal wheelchair is waiting for you.”

As they exited the plane, she saw the wheelchair she had brought from home. It was comforting and made her feel a little better. It was something she recognized in this overwhelming new country. The airline staff helped her transition into her own chair, and then she was on her way. As she turned to say thank you, a young woman grabbed the handles of her chair and started pushing. Anna was so confused! What was this lady doing?!

“Um, excuse me?” she said, surprised.

“Oh sorry, honey! I must have startled you. My name is Lacy, and I’ll be helping you today. First, we’re going to go through customs. Then, we’ll pick up your bags before we head out to find your ride. Is someone picking you up?”

“Oh, yes... my school is sending someone.” Anna was surprised that someone helped her off the plane, but now someone was going to help her move throughout the airport, too? She didn’t fly very often, but this was new to her. It was nice to have someone who knew where they were going and could help ease her nerves.

They made it to baggage claim, and it was an easy journey. There were multiple elevators to choose from, a ramp to get to customs, and other people moved out of the way to let her and Lacy by. They found the university representative who was waiting to pick her up, and they were able to get her into the car. Lacy even helped the driver put Anna’s wheelchair in the back.

“Thank you so much, Lacy. You were a big help to me today.”

“Oh, don’t worry dear! It’s my job!” Lacy yelled back as she walked away.

If the rest of her time in the United States was this easy, Anna would be amazed and so thankful.

The university

They arrived on campus in the late afternoon. Anna was exhausted, but she was excited for this adventure, especially after her lovely experience at the airport. The representatives from the study abroad office helped Anna unload her bags and assisted her in transition from the car to her wheelchair.

“Welcome! We’re going to get you checked in and then we’ll take you to your room. I’m sure you’re tired,” a young woman with a kind smile said to Anna.

The campus was bustling, but she was able to move around easily. Others moved out of her way and helped her by opening doors. It seemed so natural to them. That wasn't something Anna was used to. When they made it to her room, the staff quickly realized a mistake had been made. Anna was supposed to be in a special dorm with more room for students who have wheelchairs. Anna was sad when she saw the tiny, shoebox room, with barely enough space for her to turn around. How would she be able to move or store her clothes? She couldn't even use the desk. The study abroad advisor assured Anna that they would fix it.

"Don't worry! We are already speaking with the housing office. We will get this changed for you as soon as possible. I'm sorry for the mistake," she told Anna.

Anna decided to spend this time exploring campus. She was on a big adventure by herself for the first time, but she was confident in her ability to move around. All of the sidewalks on the campus were even and she didn't run into any major bumps. The curb cuts also enabled her to move independently on and off the sidewalks at intersections with streets. Other students also helped her, though, by opening doors or pushing the automatic button for her. She was even able to order food from the cafeteria and sit at a table that was handicap accessible. It was like heaven to Anna. She hadn't thought such a thing was possible.

As she made her way back to the dorms, the housing director showed her to her new room. He opened the door and she found a room big enough for her wheelchair to make a complete circle. The desk was perfect for her wheelchair to fit under. The closets were short so she could store and reach her clothes comfortably. Anna became emotional as she realized what the next year of her life would be like. How could this country and university provide so much for their students, but her home country could not? As much as she missed her family and friends back in Russia, she almost didn't want to go home. She felt comfortable here, like it was natural for her. She also felt so much freedom. She could be independent here and didn't have to rely on others. It was perfect.

Teaching plan

Discussion themes:

1. Inclusivity: correcting physical barriers to inclusion (an important first step) is often easier than addressing the social barriers experienced by people with disabilities.
2. Disability as a cultural identity: people with disabilities use a speech code that reflects a distinctive concept of personhood, sociality, and strategic action that differs from that of nondisabled persons.
3. Cross-cultural adaptation: co-cultural identities can be experienced differently at home and abroad.

Relevant theories and/or concepts:

1. Intercultural communication competence
2. Speech codes theory / ethnography of speaking
3. Anxiety/uncertainty management theory
4. Cross-cultural adaptation and re-entry shock

Discussion questions:

1. Although Anna is Russian and she is communicating with people from other countries, that is not the biggest challenge she sees. How is communication (both verbal and nonverbal) between people with and without disabilities also a form of “intercultural” communication? Are there any intercultural communication principles that Anna could use to enhance her interactions with her nondisabled peers and vice versa?

Common responses to this question might include:	
Intercultural communication challenges	Intercultural communication strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depending on the nature of the disability, there may be more or less noticeable differences in the verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors and abilities of the 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nondisabled persons need to mindfully see and treat people with disabilities as persons first. • Nondisabled people should let people with

communicators making this a form of intercultural communication.

- Nondisabled persons often feel high levels of uncertainty and anxiety interacting with people with disabilities. This can be due to inexperience and worry that they will say something offensive or insensitive to a person with a disability. This can cause nondisabled persons to feel overly self-conscious, leading to avoidance.
- Nondisabled persons can also hold stereotypes about people with disabilities (e.g., dependent, socially introverted, hypersensitive, depressed) that heighten uncertainty and anxiety.
- People with disabilities perceive the discomfort of nondisabled persons in their verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Sometimes this discomfort can be interpreted as a lack of interest in or acceptance of the person with a disability.

disabilities tell them what they want help with and what they do not want help with and honor their choices.

- People with disabilities can help nondisabled persons overcome their uncertainty and anxiety by emphasizing topics they have in common with the nondisabled person (e.g., cooking, hobbies, favorite television programs); nondisabled persons can also focus on similarities in initiating relationships.

2. How could others have helped make Anna feel more comfortable at the “meet and greet” at the conference or in similar situations? Include in your assessment what her friends and other students attending the conference could have done, as well as steps the “meet and greet” organizers could have taken.

Common responses to this question might include:	
<p>Conference organizers could have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensured that the seating at the “meet and greet” was accessible to persons with disabilities. • Enabled conference participants to contact the organizers in advance to ensure appropriate accommodations were available when Anna arrived. • Accommodations that are made to adapt the physical environment to the needs of people with disabilities are often useful to the nondisabled as well (e.g., easy-access seating, elevators, automatic door openers, curb cuts, non-slip surfaces, ramps, large print, etc.). 	<p>Fellow conference attendees and friends could have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Noticed Anna’s discomfort right away and addressed it instead of avoiding the situation. • Included Anna in the conversation at the table while McKenzie went to get another chair. • Opened up the circle at the table by orienting their bodies to include Anna in the circle.

3. Anna wants change for her home country. How might Anna use communication (various media forms, building intercultural communication awareness, etc.) to help create change in her home country?

Common responses to this question might include:	
Mass communication channels	Local forms of advocacy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anna can continue using social journalism to highlight the lack of disability accessibility in her home country. • Anna could raise the profile of her work by partnering with national and international news organizations to cover stories of both progress and continued challenges. • Anna could build a social media presence around this issue to grow awareness, activism, and support. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compile examples of accommodations she finds while studying in the U.S. and return to her home institution with recommendations. • Enlist the help of local organizations in Russia to promote change through fundraising and awareness at a grassroots level. • Create an organization (if there is not one) in which people with disabilities can organize to provide support to one another and promote their interests.

4. After spending time in the United States, Anna might feel like a foreigner in her home country upon her return. Why? How might she manage this re-entry culture-shock?

Common responses to this question might include:	
Reasons for return culture-shock	Management strategies (both helpful and unhelpful)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anna likes the new ease with which she can operate in the U.S.; returning to her home country may make the lack of accommodations more noticeable and irritating than even before. • Culture and relationships are dynamic, and at the same time that Anna is acculturating to a new culture, the people and situations she knows back in her home country are also changing in her absence. • To the extent that Anna acculturates to the U.S., she will become subtly, perhaps even dramatically in some ways, different from the co-ethnic friends and family she left behind. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helpful strategies for managing return culture-shock: being aware that return culture-shock can be just as destabilizing as the culture-shock experienced in the sojourn to a new place; rebuilding local knowledge and familiarity by catching up with friends and family; reintegrating local information into your communication environment. • Unhelpful strategies might include: ruminating on the new friendships missed with individuals from the sojourn country; focusing on negative comparisons between the home country and the sojourn country; and alienating or boring friends and family in the home country by endlessly talking about the sojourn country and your experiences there.

Wrap-up and key insights:

1. What are the key insights that we can take away from this case discussion? How do these insights apply more broadly to situations beyond this specific case?
2. What do you think of the various challenges we have discussed for the characters in this case? What issues, do you think, remain unresolved?

Suggested readings for preparation to facilitate this case discussion:

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CHAPTER 2

A COLORFUL COLLABORATION?

TAYLOR KENNEY

Members from two unfamiliar and diverse communities face conflict when attempting to solve one community's financial crisis.

The cash crisis

As she shut her notebook filled with scribbles from the city budget meeting, Mayor Wilson knew the city was in trouble. After months of brainstorming fundraising tactics, the council had officially run out of ideas. The Green Community, once filled to the brim with life, activity, and events, was quickly losing residents and their once steady influx of cash. The Green Community residents, more commonly known amongst themselves and others as Greenies, were strong people. They prided themselves on being self-sufficient and successful, which meant that asking for help and giving it to others wasn't in their nature. If a Greenie struggled, they wouldn't reach out for help. If a Greenie saw another member of their community struggling, it wasn't their business.

That's why this financial crisis had hit the city so hard. Mayor Wilson, one of the most prominent and prideful Greenies in the community, was faced with a decision—ask for help or watch the city crumble before her. But the Mayor was resourceful and unwilling to fail. Suppressing her pride behind a smile, Mayor Wilson placed her “Proud to be Green” pin on her lapel and hit the streets. She wanted to ask her citizens for help before she proceeded with her less than desirable backup plan. As she was walking down Front Street, Mayor Wilson admired the rows of perfectly manicured lawns and freshly painted white fences. She gazed upwards at the never-ending two-story colonial homes decorated proudly with green shutters and window boxes. The pride the Greenies had in their heritage instilled a reassuring feeling within the mayor. “Anyone who loves their community this much will surely be willing to help keep it, even if it means doing

something out of their comfort zone,” the mayor thought to herself as she extended her fist to knock on the first door.

“Oh, sorry. This is just such a bad time.”

“The city is struggling? Who knew?”

“We just can’t.”

While the dialogue varied, the answers from the community remained the same. No one was able, or willing, to help. Having now exhausted all of her options, Mayor Wilson pulled out her phone and initiated her backup plan. “Brianna? Hello, it’s Mayor Kacie Wilson. I think it’s time.”

The Redlet rundown

The Red Community, whose residents were referred to as Redlets, were located several thousands of miles away from the Greenies, across the Zenith Divide. On the outside, the Red Community, for all intents and purposes, were very similar to the Green Community. Their yards were perfectly manicured, their houses were tall and white, and their windows were accented with red trimmings and window boxes. However, that’s where the similarities ended. Unlike the Greenies, the Redlets were not overly proud people. If there was anything prideful about them, it was the pride they took in helping their neighbor. The Redlets built a strong and connected community, based on openness, honesty, and asking for help. Because of their strong desire to help, the community flourished. Community events were well attended, and local businesses had a steady flow of customers.

The community wasn’t as perfect as it seemed, though. While the Redlets liked helping each other, it often turned into a competition of who could help who more. Their competitive and authoritative nature was an attribute that the Greenies were well aware of. The Greenies also had a reputation with the Redlets—their keep-to-themselves, selfish attitudes were perceived by outsiders as stuck-up and cold. Because of the distance that separated them and the preconceived notions about the other, the two communities never interacted.

Fixing the finances

Brianna pulled up to the Green Community City Hall with her Redlet briefcase clasped tightly in her left hand. She took a deep breath, scanned her surroundings, and reached for the front door. To her surprise, just as she

was about to reach for the handle, the door swung away from her. “Hello, Brianna. Welcome!” Mayor Wilson gleamed. “We’re so glad you’re here.”

As the two walked in silence towards the council, which was meeting in their large board room, the apprehension of an unprecedented meeting grew.

After a long meeting that briefed Brianna, who was the Redlet Chief Innovation and Finance Officer, on the current situation of the Green Community, the council left for lunch. Brianna suddenly found herself alone in the town hall that was once filled with Greenies. She took a moment to catch her breath as she sat down at a table in the center of the rotunda. She was good at her job, and she had no doubt that she would be able to help the community. But her skills weren’t what she was concerned about. Her reception at the meeting earlier in the day was less than warm. “Maybe it’s just their ‘keep to myself’ attitude?” she thought as she opened her lunch bag. But Brianna couldn’t shake the feeling that Mayor Wilson was the only one who had actually *wanted* her help. She knew that in order to successfully enact her plan to save the Green Community, she would need the participation and approval of everyone—which she knew would not be easy, especially with the plan she was proposing. She lifted her eyes for a moment and saw Mayor Wilson walking past. She was just about to raise her hand to flag her over when she noticed the mayor quickly shift her gaze to break their eye contact. Maybe the mayor was even having second thoughts now that she had arrived.

Mayor Wilson knew Brianna’s presence was the last thing the council wanted. After all, she was from the “over-proud and elitist Redlet community,” as one of the council members had described them. But Brianna was smart, creative, and extremely good at her job. After she had accepted the role of Chief Innovation and Finance Officer, the Red Community had flourished rapidly. The strong sense of Red pride she had instilled in her community was something that the Greenies were missing. Mayor Wilson had begged the council several times to allow her to seek Brianna’s council. But because of her allegiance to the Red Community, they had refused.

“We don’t need an elitist Red to come in here and tell us how to live.”

“I’d rather have our bank accounts lean and be a Green than invite in an inbred Red.”

“Those righteous Reds aren’t welcome here.”

Mayor Wilson thought that maybe if the council members met someone from the Red Community, they would see that they were, in fact, good people. After all, Brianna and she had worked together several times

and they'd never had any problems. Eventually, Mayor Wilson went above the angry council and acted on her own authority to bring Brianna in. The morning's meeting was supposed to have been a friendly introduction and welcome for Brianna, but that had definitely not been the case. As Mayor Wilson collected her things and headed to lunch, she saw Brianna sitting alone at a table eating. She so badly wanted to pull up a chair and probe her for her thoughts, but the anxiety she felt of imposing on another person steered her towards her car.

The proposed plan

To Brianna, it was simple. To the council, it was absurd. The opposition Brianna faced was more than Mayor Wilson had anticipated. Her ideas were good. No, great. Her vision of breaking down barriers and bringing the Greenies together to help finance the town was inspiring.

“How could she suggest using a spin-off of the Red Community's ‘Together We're Strong’ town motto to bring life back into the Green Community?”

“It isn't our way. As a matter of fact, it goes against almost everything we believe.”

“‘Growing Green—Together’ will not be accepted by this council, let alone the general public.

Mayor Wilson could see the frustration growing in Brianna's eyes. She wanted so badly to slam her gavel on the table to silence the protests of the council members. She had the power but not the nerve. Again, her strong Greenie pride kept her from imposing on her fellow council members' outcries.

Meanwhile, Brianna struggled to conceal her frustration. She had worked so hard on her proposal. She felt confident in her community involvement plan, even though the Greenies tended to be cold and siloed. That sense of confidence, though, was now gone. The council hated her ideas. She was flabbergasted that joint community efforts could be so repulsive. She deafened her ears to the scornful remarks of the councilmen and locked eyes with Mayor Wilson. She could tell the mayor was deep in thought, but about what, she was unsure. After 30 minutes of being questioned, grilled, and rejected, Brianna stood. “I traveled all of this way to help. Your community is struggling, not mine. I have ideas, lots of them, but I can barely finish a thought without you shooting it down. I appreciate your time,” Brianna turned her gaze towards Mayor Wilson, “and your hospitality, but I cannot help those who do not want to be helped.”

With that, Brianna finally silenced the room. She collected her things and walked out the door. “All I needed was one ally. Someone to stand up for me and help me,” Brianna thought. “I thought Mayor Wilson would. But I suppose, she is a Green after all.”

What now

As soon as the door shut behind Brianna, the councilmen stirred and buzzed. The once silent room was now filled with backhanded comments and snarky remarks.

“Typical Redlet, only wanting to help when it’s easy for them.”

“I can’t say I didn’t expect this type of behavior.”

“The righteous Reds, ladies and gentlemen.”

Mayor Wilson placed her left hand to her temple and rubbed it vigorously. She knew that Brianna was their last shot at saving the town. The unknown of the future was suddenly even more terrifying. The mayor, upset with herself for not reaching out and helping Brianna, removed her “Proud to Be Green” pin and placed it on her notebook.

“What now, Mayor Wilson? How do we save the town?”

Teaching plan

Discussion themes:

1. Associative and dissociative behavior in intergroup interactions
2. Stereotypes and negative expectations
3. Contact in intergroup relations

Relevant theories and/or concepts:

1. Contextual theory of associative-dissociative interethnic communication
2. Intergroup contact theory
3. Stereotypes
4. Ingroup-outgroup behavior

Teaching tips / instructional goals:

1. Begin the discussion by reviewing a brief synopsis of the case. Main points to hit include character names and their roles, as well as the overall plot of the narrative:
 - a. “Greenies”: Believe in self-sufficiency, independence, and privacy
 - b. “Redlets”: Believe in sharing, collaboration, and openness
 - c. Brianna: Redlet CIO and CFO
 - d. Mayor Kacie Wilson: Leads the council; brings Brianna in to help fix the problem
 - e. The Greenie council: strongly against Brianna’s presence and ideas to help
2. Real life connections may be drawn as part of preparation for responding to the discussion questions. Parallels can be drawn with many instances of stereotyping, ethnocentrism, and prejudice toward outgroups based on identity.

Discussion questions:

1. How do stereotypes and community biases impact the task before Brianna even arrives in the Green Community?

Common responses to this question might include:

- It wouldn't matter what Briana said, the council would've disagreed simply because she is a Redlet.
- They didn't take a chance to get to know each other; they made decisions based on stereotypes.
- It created a sense of hostility between strangers.
- It set up false narratives and negative expectations.
- It prevented people on both sides from truly focusing on and discussing the issues.
- It allowed for Brianna to be reduced to her community identity instead of being a person.

2. What could have been done to prevent the abrupt and unpleasant welcome Brianna received when she arrived?

Common responses to this question might include:

- Mayor Wilson should have tried harder to receive approval from the council before inviting her.
- More education and the Redlets and how their community was thriving.
- A friendly gathering that is non-work related so that the members could get to know Brianna as a person.
- Mayor Wilson could've provided more information about Brianna's arrival.
- Brianna could have taken steps to either accommodate or assimilate to the Greenies.
- Brianna's counsel should not have been sought after.