

## 7 VIRTUES OF AN INTERCULTURALIST

### MAKING VIRTUE OUT OF NECESSITY

Though the idea of Virtue seems a little outdated in the contemporary world, being an effective interculturalist implies a certain kind of ethics. There are lots of virtues to choose from, such as honesty, forgiveness, determination, or honor which may play a part in one's idea of what it means to be a good person. But the virtues below aim to describe the qualities of anyone who is effective at bridging language or culture – independent of their cultural background.



**Observation** – The primary virtue of an Interculturalist is observation. We cannot be effective at moving through different realities if we are not watching people and observing our surroundings. This includes listening to people, and seeing how they are reacting to us.

- Seeing everyone in the classroom
- Demonstrating the ability to describe what happened vs. an interpretation or an evaluation
- Noticing details that might make a difference and offering alternative explanations for what they might mean
- Effectively provoking the Self-Reflection as DJ
- Watching other instructors
- Listening to other colleagues
- Asking questions to understand
- Triangulating with many people or sources of information
- Noticing when additional clarification or follow-up is required

**Responsiveness** – Though people and cultures vary widely regarding who responds to whom, under what circumstances, and how often, the Interculturalist responds to others' communications quickly and appropriately. Because we know that people have different reference points and assumptions, it's effective to clearly show that you are engaged with connection by responding.

- Responding as soon as possible to texts, phone calls, and emails (within 2 hours for a text, same day for email or phone call)
- Ensure the message is delivered
- Talking when it's time to talk, listening when it's time to listen

- Reacting swiftly and appropriately to challenges
- Making gestures that clearly show that you see people, especially if there are many things going on
- Following up on possible hurt feelings
- Learning and respecting others boundaries
- Following conversations through to completion, not leaving people hanging

**Reliability** – Act in consistent obvious ways over time. In this way, people will quickly know what to expect from you – but perhaps more importantly – they will notice when there is a variance, and this can carry meaning as well. Imagine that you have a friend who always answers her phone when you call. One day, she doesn't. You know this is very rare, so you assume there is something going on out of the ordinary. This kind of calculation is happening all the time in intercultural contexts. Consistency creates security in unfamiliar contexts.

- Creating a noticeable sense of reliability for any repeated behavior – arriving early, updating the website, returning phone calls or texts
- Mindfully telegraphing when you will be breaking consistency (“I will be out of cell phone range for a couple of days”)
- Avoiding last minute cancellations
- Slow and steady is better than a short burst of awesome
- Taking on one class and completing it rather than taking on three and not finishing any of them
- Not getting overwhelmed

**Self-Awareness** – One needs to know one's strengths and weaknesses, ones capabilities, and know these honestly. Many times, people think language teaching is easy because they are focused on their intimate knowledge of the content – but they fail to account for their lack of self-awareness regarding boundaries, ability to withstand confusion and disappointment, or inability to motivate people along a long arduous path that doesn't show a lot for the amount of effort invested. It's also knowing the impact that your behavior and demeanor have on other people. And if you haven't taken a good look at yourself, exploring intercultural contexts will force you to do so very quickly, so get ready!

- Describing yourself the way others would describe you
- Being aware of your strengths and weaknesses
- Bouncing back from disappointment
- Advocating for your own boundaries and needs
- Knowing how to respect others' boundaries
- Showing that you can push/motivate
- Showing that you can pull back
- Showing that you can change and improve

**Initiative** – We have to take initiative to be effective cultural bridge builders, even if our home culture or personal style suggests that we shouldn't. We have to try. Learning a language and finding ones way in an unfamiliar reality requires that we

take action in situations where we don't know what the rules are. So, this will not only make us better teachers, but it will also model bold and decisive action. When we blend Initiative with Observation, we have a can-do attitude that allows us to make productive mistakes, and then pull back so we don't make the mistake again. It's also a part of leadership to always put twice as much effort as you ask your learners to do.

- Stepping up, Stepping forward
- Being willing to face something difficult or scary
- Reaching out to assistants, MCs, DJs, P-P-T Staff
- Asking questions when something is confusing or interesting
- Doing research and applying it in the classroom
- Turning ideas into action
- Experimenting with unfamiliar techniques
- Initiating a new relationship with a colleague or a learner
- Doing more than the minimum
- Going outside the classroom to make connections
- Trying again even though you failed
- Determination to go the distance
- Directing others without apologizing and without bossing

**Openness** – If we are interacting with people from multiple different backgrounds, there's just no way we can know every detail that will prevent any mistake from happening. Fortunately, the people you're working with will likely know that you don't know, and give you a lot of space for error. You should be giving lots of space for error, too. Openness means letting yourself be yourself, but being open to switch direction if something is not working. There's a humility and a flexibility in Openness, but there's also a resilience. Even if you thought they didn't like you, even though they are doing something that's triggering you ("It's just their culture") – you back and try to engage again carrying optimism for a mutually satisfying outcome. We all have to defend ourselves from time to time – but learning how to make our case without feeling a need to defend ourselves, and simply be wrong and let that be ok without resentment or vengeful thinking is what we're going for here. This is a big category that encompasses vulnerability, transformative listening, humility, flexibility, humor and not taking oneself too seriously.

- Working well with assistants (of all different types)
- Allowing people into the classroom
- Changing your direction on relatively short notice
- Being wrong without getting dramatic
- Not reacting when your buttons are pushed
- Allowing others to be wrong without shaming them
- Knowing that there are things you don't know
- Using your privileges and assets responsibly
- Knowing that you can change and be a better teacher and a better person
- Being optimistic
- Revising your interpretation

- Accepting the consequences of your own behavior

**Clarity** – Using expressive gestures is one thing, but sometimes, people will wave their arms about in an almost random fashion, and they aren't aware of it. This sends distracting messages. Other times, people will talk a lot – because they're nervous, or they are trying to explain something that is complex or nuanced. Clarity in an intercultural context means using body language in very efficient ways (gesturing towards things you are talking about, for example), giving good directions with a minimum of explanatory language, showing or drawing a picture instead of explaining. Ensuring that people understand what you intend by following through for observable evidence

- Communicating your own boundaries and needs
- Using only the words you need to communicate with
- Asking questions about others needs, boundaries, and experiences
- Asking meaningful questions based on your observations
- Saying when you get it
- Rephrasing for understanding
- Read the lines, and read between the lines, too
- Communicate to pass a message; pass the message; confirm that it's been passed, then stop
- Give clear, concise direction when that's appropriate, draw out nuance and explore feelings when that's appropriate