



4-1996

## Matters of Consequence

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### Recommended Citation

Laycock, Mary (1996) "Matters of Consequence," *Teaching and Learning: The Journal of Natural Inquiry & Reflective Practice*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 2 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://commons.und.edu/tl-nirp-journal/vol10/iss2/1>

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## **Matters of Consequence**

Graduate student office space seldom provides adequately for research and scholarly activities but there is little doubt that it serves a socialization function. My experience at Penn State in the mid-1980s is a case in point.

During my year in residence, I shared office space and a window with two other doctoral students, one from Argentina and one from China. We shared in common a love for learning, a desire to succeed as doctoral candidates, an appreciation of our privileged position in an intellectual community, and an addiction to sweets from our respective cultures. We did not share the ability to converse, each in her own language, and be understood by the others. Only I, the speaker of English, enjoyed that ease of communication. Consequently, when any one of us wanted all three of us to participate in conversation, English was spoken. I accepted this practice and was entirely pleased with our relationship except for the times when they were on the phone or speaking in person with individuals who conversed in their first language.

At those times, I experienced the uneasy feeling that perhaps I was purposely being excluded or, worse still, and particularly if there was laughter or gestures such as eye rolling, that I was being talked about in unflattering terms. My Argentinean officemate spoke Spanish rapidly and with enthusiasm, including highly animated gesturing, easy laughter, and a fair amount of what sounded to my ears like expletives. I couldn't ignore the commotion she caused. Chinese people, it seems to me, are endlessly arguing with one another. My ear hears Chinese as clipped, abrupt, and abrasive. Sometimes when my Chinese officemate was on the phone in conversation with her husband I would leave the office as I was certain I was overhearing marital discord. Having no desire to appear impolite, I slunk off in search of less electrified space.

The accumulation of miscommunications that year caused me to reconsider my monolingual status both in the way I am privileged as a speaker of English and deprived by it of opportunities to participate more fully as a colleague to individuals who for education, economic, political, and other reasons have learned my language and would welcome my efforts to learn theirs.

I look forward in happy anticipation to the time when all of us are competent communicators in the many languages defined by speech but not exclusive of the undefined human interactions that transcend the limitations of the spoken or written word.