

Enter Coffee OR Exit Rachel! (Café con Rachel)

Two thirds of my scholars are born in other countries, many others second generation students. I love the cultural, linguistic, social and religious diversity each one contributes to class discussion, debate and arguments. Being present and in the moment in our courses is important. Stepping away from two or more jobs, family responsibilities, legal pressures and more, the learning community can be both an island and an intersection, source of refreshment, wonder, intersection and interaction that is insulated from the rest of each participant's daily routines.

In a rather full course exploring Social Environment, I was rather pleased that each day seats filled in from the front back, not the wall first and the front row last. In fact one student always made it a point to be front row and center, textbook in hand, notebook in place and an attentive happy disposition in play. Rachel occasionally started class with a question or an observation, often provoking subsequent interaction by other students building upon her startup action. She always did well on early assessments and abstracts – a format for student sharing their reading and opinions that related to course content throughout the semester.

And so it was a source of amazement bordering on shock when one morning, shortly after class had begun that Rachel quickly converted her smile and happy disposition into a grimace and an angry posture. In the course of a spirited conversation among fellow scholars, she stood up, threw her books on the floor and stormed out of the class.

Bewildered and annoyed, I inquired “what was the problem” to her back as she charged out the door and into the hall. I recessed the class for a break. “Pardon my short absence to permit me to find out what must be a problem for Rachel. I will return in five minutes after talking with her.”

I pursued Rachel down the hall, asking her to stop and discuss what was on her mind. She ignored me until I tapped her on the shoulder. She turned around, tearfully looked me in the eye and said in no uncertain terms: “If you do not let me bring you a coffee before each class, I will never return to that class!”

I stood there, chagrined, perplexed, grasping for a humorous transition. “If you think a cup of coffee will bribe this professor, you are mistaken. In fact you are doing so well, you need not offer a bribe for any influence at all. If we are talking about a bribe, let me tell you about suits I like or cars.”

Rachel looked at me and said: “I do not want to be doing well. I want to be equal to or better than any other student in class, maybe even challenging your thinking. I want to be active in responding to the questions you raise at the start of each class. BUT I AM DEAF. I READ YOUR LIPS FROM WHERE I SIT IN THE FRONT ROW. WHEN YOU START CLASS WITH AN OVERVIEW AND THEN SEEK RESPONSES, I PROCESS THE WORDS AT A

DIFFERENT PACE THAN MY HEARING PEERS! AND I GET IN ‘LATE’ TO EVERY CLASS OPENING DISCUSSION!”

I inquired: “And how will a cup of coffee help? It may even speed me up because of the caffeine involved.”

Rachel thoughtfully explained: “After the overview and before you ask for student involvement by raising hands, stop and take a sip of coffee – letting my mental processing catch up – and then ask for class responses. Then I will be equal to or better than my peers who hear and process differently than me.”

Wow! I had to admit that Rachel had just given me and all my present and future scholars a gift. Probably other students heard at different rates - not only deaf students, but people who spoke English as a second language, people with different American regional language patterns and more.

“I agree to bring a coffee to class each day.” I hugged her, shook hands and escorted her back to class. When we re-entered, I convened the class as Rachel joined back in the class. I announced my thanks and appreciation to Rachel for sharing an improvement for the way we conduct class that I would explain in detail when we next met. She looked relieved at the way I handled her return after her precipitous departure. The class was curious and we completed our session rather happily.

At the start of the next class, I had more coffee than I could ever consume. Rachel brought me a cup. I brought a cup. And mysterious source had left a “café con leche” on my podium. I shared the new approach to helping the “fast speaking professor from Chicago” (me) to slow down enough to encourage more time for all bright students in class to join in earlier each day in discussions to which each may have value to add and all could benefit.

I never did elaborate on the fact that Rachel was deaf. I did elaborate on the fact that each person processes information, insight and inspiration distinctly by reflecting dominant “multiple intelligent” processes, screening through different operative language competencies and by negotiating variations in American regional language patterns. It was a teachable/learnable moment that Rachel provided to me and her peers.

And for nearly ten years whenever I taught at the Hialeah Campus a small cup of “café con leche” mysteriously appeared on my podium or at my desk. I suspect a member of the maintenance staff or other kind colleague observed the exchange between Rachel and I and made their best interpretation about what happened. The “café con leche” has provided a “halo effect” for this professor ever since.