

## Hearing the other side

(Original)

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In 2022, I started my undergraduate studies in the U.S., and, since it was my first time going abroad, I really experienced a culture shock which lasted for months. In our college, new students are offered a special course called FYC which helps them with their transition to college. My course was named “hearing the other side”. It was related to philosophy and it was mainly about listening to the ideas and voices that we disagree with. During the course, very difficult topics like free speech, gender



equality, and geopolitics were discussed. At first it was quite hard for me to contribute to the class discussions and share my views as I did not have past experience in discussing those topics with people. Then, slowly, I started joining the discussions by sharing my opinions that were shaped by my cultural values and the perspective that I developed growing up in Uzbekistan. Interestingly, almost everyone in the class disagreed with me or found my opinions strange. Perhaps, it was because I was the only international student in the class and came from a culturally conservative background. These differences were especially prominent in discussions on religion and cultural practice, as my classmates had totally different views towards Islam and Muslim majority countries. I was quite isolated in the class and I began to disengage from the class discussions to avoid conflict. However, since class discussions were a significant portion of our grades, I decided to explain the situation to my professor. He said he could give me alternative assignments however he recommended that I keep joining in on discussions even though my views differ. He also mentioned the main point of the course was actually listening to the other side, listening to the ideas that you oppose.

From that time, the conflict between my views and those of the class seemed like an opportunity to critically question my own stances and improve my debate skills. I started preparing before each discussion, doing extra research and gathering evidence to support each of my statements in class discussion. Day by day I realized that I was learning more about my thinking and how I developed certain beliefs. I also tried to think and look at the situation from my classmates' perspectives, as most of them have a very limited understanding of my religion or have not lived in a community based society like Uzbekistan. In the next discussions I tried to explain my experiences and demonstrate that they lack knowledge in some of the topics, instead of denying their statements immediately. After some classes, there was no conflict anymore, there was just a friendly discussion. When we discussed something related to religion and international topics, they started asking my perspective and respected what I said, as they realized they lack knowledge and experience in such topics. Similarly, I respected and tried to understand their views during the conversations about American politics, a topic that I am not good at. By the end of the class, we learned from one another and the conflict itself was necessary to show me how to engage with audiences that are not sympathetic to my positions.

The biggest lesson from this "ideological" conflict was that sometimes, when we do not understand each other's views, we deny and start arguing immediately. However, the biggest solution for this sort of conflict is admitting what we do not know and keeping mutual respect while arguing. In that way, with respect, people can produce creative ideas together that work for everyone in the society. This experience has shaped the way I engage with cross-cultural conflicts, focusing on building common understanding instead of focusing on our differences and inspired me to further keep studying and pursuing a career on an international level as I realized that such conversations expand my outlook. As an aspiring economist, I aim to work for international companies and focus on economic development of low income countries. Such careers require a lot of negotiations and conversations with people with various backgrounds. I believe that my experience in the FYS course prepares me for such negotiations and helps me become a person who contributes to a peaceful world.