

Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters



Module 5

Activity 2: The significance of sequencing

In the left-hand column of the table below you will see the AIE's section headings. Match the headings with the excerpts from Imad's AIE story. The first one has been done for you.

Section headings	Excerpts from Imad's AIE
1. The encounter	a) It happened in September during a visit to an outdoor museum in a small town located in the south. I was a volunteer with the UN which was hosting an international convention. There were people from all over the world. I was accompanying some folks in wheelchairs. Because of the wooded terrain, they had difficulties keeping track of the tour. Two of the participants, one from Korea and the other one from Argentina, decided to head back to the main square and I could see they were facing some difficulties in doing so. On an impulse, I went closer and gave them a push. They objected violently.
2. The other person or people	b) I thought about the situation for some time and tried to put myself in their place and see what it feels like. I also found some answers in my sociology class at university. We had a lecture on health and disability where I could ask some questions and the answers helped me draw a couple of conclusions.
3. Your feelings	c) There were no similarities whatsoever between what we thought and felt at the time. They were upset and angry, and I was shocked. It might be that they were focused on how to overcome the obstacles of the terrain, whereas I thought that they were in need of external help. I acted out of prejudice - I thought that since they had a disability, they were constantly in need of help. I should have known better - any human being would feel upset if their independence was denied them. I could have acted differently - stay close, watch them and wait for them to ask for help if they possibly wanted that.
4. The other person's feelings	d) The experience sheds some light on a side of me that I did not know existed. It was surely a negative side but this experience helped me think a lot about how I can change to make a better person of myself. If I were to tell this story to my brothers they would disapprove of my behaviour then. The reason is that they all live abroad, have been in contact with many different people, and they know better how to approach people who are not the same as us. But if I were to tell some of my friends about this experience, they would agree with the way I have acted. Living and working with people with disabilities in our community is not very common.

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5. Same and different	e) There were hundreds of other participants who were doing that tour. I only knew few of them. I also knew the names of the volunteers who I worked with, but none of them were there when the incident happened. Most people were wearing normal everyday clothes such as jeans, pants, and T-shirts. There were a few African participants who were wearing traditional African tribal clothes. All the participants were older than me.
6. Talking to each other	f) I suppose it was a typical experience for them because the same thing happened when other people tried to 'help'. I am sure their angry response was provoked by the repeated nature of the experience whereby they felt they were pitied by others. Their chairs have become part of their identity and when people touched them it meant trespassing their personal space. This explains why they were enraged, stating that they could take care of themselves. Some of the other people involved were as shocked as I was. Others did not show anything, they seemed to know the reasons for their rage. One of the onlookers approached me and said that I shouldn't have done what I did, for "it really upsets them."
7. Finding out more	g) I was sad and confused. Why did the two men object so violently? I was only trying to help, what harm could I have caused? I stepped back and watched them as they eventually succeeded in reaching the main square by themselves. For the rest of the day, I continued next to them, talking about various subjects but not mentioning the earlier incident.
8. Using comparisons to understand	h) The reaction of the two men was the same, and yet, they came from two different continents and two different countries. They only shared the misfortune of having both legs amputated. What I compare here is my reaction, being the first time I work with people with a disability, and that of others, who acted 'normally'. For, in my cultural context, minimal attention is given to people with physical and mental challenges, by both institutions and individuals. This makes it difficult to know how to act when we face such situations. In other places, people are more sensitive and respect human dignity.
9. Thinking back and looking forward	i) The first thing I did was express my shock in Arabic, my native language. "What happened?", "What's wrong?" I noticed nobody understood what I was saying and said it again, this time in English. The problem here was not about not knowing how or what to communicate, but rather being unable to understand what provoked their unexpected reaction.