

Name

Course/Section

Observation Site

Subject

Date

Other Information

## CULTURAL PORTRAIT

### Background

Diversity is one of the most pressing issues facing teachers today and probably one of the least understood and discussed. Too many times we make initial assumptions about people based on some distinguishing characteristic such as skin color, sex, age, physical ability, clothing, or the neighborhood in which they live. When we engage these stereotypes, we simultaneously (a) group many individuals into some kind of unified block because we believe they all see the world in the same way, (b) limit our ability to see the person as an individual because we cannot get past distinguishing characteristics and all the meanings we attach to them, and (c) position the individual as *The Other*, someone who is fundamentally different from us because of some physical or social marker. One resulting problem with these assumptions is the construction of boundaries that limit our expectations of whole groups of individuals, and in the same instance, limit our own.

### Activity

This exercise requires you to conduct a series of interviews with a person whom you believe is culturally different from yourself. On concluding your interviews, you should prepare a written and/or oral narrative in which you present your informant as you came to know him or her through your interactions, and present an analysis of your presuppositions concerning this individual.

Phase One: The Interview. First and foremost your informant must be guaranteed anonymity, and strict ethical considerations of

human research must be followed. Your school will have specific guidelines that you should follow. You will want to take notes during this time with your informant. The use of a portable audio or video recorder would be most beneficial in capturing the entirety of the interview as well as the inflections and emotions of the informant. You must, however, follow the rules of your institution regarding this method of data gathering. At the very least, you should have written permission of the individual before using any recording medium.

You should spend time discussing such topics as (but not limited to) childhood, friends, family, goals, schooling and other forms of education, leisure activities, dating, language, church/religion, work, politics, personal points of view on contemporary issues, or any other topic your informant wishes to discuss. You are attempting to understand the world as seen through the eyes of your informant.

During your conversations, identify the cultural contexts from which this individual constructs a worldview different from your own. Your intent is to identify and clarify specific cultural perspectives that provide particular meanings for events that have occurred in this person's life. In other words, it is not sufficient simply to identify what happened to your informant; your goal is to relate how and why your informant understood those events in a particular way. For instance, your informant participated in voter registration activities during the 1960s. What did that mean to this person? Why did your informant engage in this potentially dangerous activity? What was it about that era that inspired

such actions on the part of so many diverse individuals?

Phase Two: The Narrative. Once the interviews are completed, you should produce a narrative to share with your classmates. This should be more than a simple transcription of the interview. You should present both a portrait of the informant's world and an analysis of your preconceptions. The bulk of the narrative will address your portrait of the informant and his or her world. In doing so, you must first clarify the cultural contexts central to the informant so that we might understand why the informant sees the world in this unique manner. Using excerpts from the interview material helps us to understand how the informant views the world and what factors might have led to those particular perspectives.

With limitations of space or time, you will not be able to use all the material you collected in the interview. Therefore, your responsibility is to edit the material down to a manageable amount. This edited product should be broad enough to present an adequate portrait of the individual and limited enough to provide for depth of presentation. The narrative should develop in a unified manner without digression. The closing section of the narrative should address your own subjective preconceptions concerning the informant and how these changed or were reinforced during the interview.

### Reflective Narrative

Why did you label this individual as culturally different from yourself in the first place? Were these differences borne out under investigation or did the commonalities of your experiences mitigate the differences you assumed existed? Were your assumptions based on stereotypes? How has this experience changed the way you look at other people who might appear to be different from yourself? How might this exercise have an important impact on your future work as a teacher?

### Related Readings

- Bauman, H., & Dirksen, L. (1995). "Silence is not without voice": Including deaf culture within the multicultural curricula. *Radical Teacher*, 47, 22-24.
- Danahay, M. A. (1992). Teaching autobiography as cultural critique. *Critic-College English Association*, 54(2), 8-20.
- McIntosh, P. (1988). White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. *Independent School*, 49(2), 31-36.
- Merna, S. B. (1988). *Case study research in education: A qualitative approach*. San Francisco: Jasley-Bass.
- Solas, J. (1992). Investigating teacher and student thinking about the process of teaching and learning using autobiography and repertory grid. *Review of Educational Research*, 62(2), 205-225.