

Cross-Cultural Communication: Bringing Diverse Groups Together

presentation facilitated by
Wenonah Valentine, MBA
March 6, 2010

[NOTE: *This outline was developed by PEN staff based on notes taken during Ms. Valentine's presentation. It is intended not as a transcript of Ms. Valentine's presentation, but to convey key points and ideas for stimulating cross-cultural conversations at your school site.*]

Learning Objectives

- 1) **Asking** the right questions.
- 2) **Engaging** in meaningful conversation
- 3) **Framing** language around common ground

Ms. Valentine's slide presentation included photographs of people she works with. She invited participants to look at each slide and answer the question, "Who am I?" before sharing with us information about the person's racial or ethnic background, language, parental/marital status, education, and employment or professional status. Because these were people Ms. Valentine knew personally, she was able to take us beyond the stereotypes we may have about the groups people appear to represent, and tell us something more about who they are and what they bring to the school setting in which they are involved.

Asking Questions

Ms. Valentine pointed out that all of us make assumptions about who people are. "We do 'racial profiling' – it's a way of quickly assessing who we're dealing with." For example, when we see a woman with gray hair with a young child, we may assume that she is a grandmother, but it is also possible that she is a mother who had children after 40.

So we make assumptions, and our assumptions may be incorrect. Ms. Valentine gave an example of a woman she works with who comes from Cuba. "Gloria, who is fair, she says: 'My daughters learned Spanish as their first language, and are entrenched in the Cuban culture. We are Cubans. So when someone comes along and thinks that I'm white, it's an opportunity for me to say, English is not my first language.' Making assumptions and being corrected comes with the territory."

Ms. Valentine encouraged us to ask each other questions in a respectful manner that encourages a conversation, giving people an opportunity to either confirm or correct our initial assumptions and provide an educational experience, a "teachable moment."

Engaging in Meaningful Conversation

The essence of cross-cultural communication is about learning to see and appreciate diversity, not ignoring it. “The advantage of being at the table with different people is not that we don’t see colors, because that’s not true. If you don’t see that I am African-American, you’ve missed who I am. I want you to see and celebrate and engage with who I am.”

Once we develop a relationship, we feel more safe asking questions. When you’re talking about culture and race, you just have to be respectful, but go ahead and ask the question, “Where are your people from?” – and we’ll open up and tell you about ourselves. All of us have stories to tell.

[Slide shows a snapshot of young man and young woman.] The young man is identified as African-American, single, speaks 3 languages – actually 4. Second-generation college graduate. Born to unmarried parents, Generation X. This is Wenonah Valentine’s son, seen with a friend he met while teaching English in Japan. Ms. Valentine points out that her son “has the opportunity to engage with people of different cultures, because that was the gift of going to public school. And he has the gift of being comfortable in his own skin.”

Framing Language around Common Ground

“There is no color when it comes to parenting. We want the best for our children. We support and celebrate and value our culture and language, but when it comes to our children, we all want the same thing.”

Ms. Valentine concluded her presentation by talking about the different gifts that different members of our school communities bring to the table:

- Student parents are beginning to really apply what they’ve learned.
- Immigrants have brought their history here.
- People who are homeless, they have gratitude when they are embraced and their children are embraced. There are many homeless shelters and their children are in our schools.
- Parents who own businesses bring resources. They are part of our school. It’s a gift to be able to bring the food.
- Parents who are unemployed or in a job transition. They have the opportunity to serve, they have expertise, and it may be only for a few months.
- Parents who are employed also bring their expertise, and they may bring other volunteers. Target, for example, they give back to the schools. To do work, to give – they look for parent involvement.
- Grandparents give back time, mentorship.

She reinforced the message that asking someone where she or he is originally from can be a good conversation opener. For example, “African-American parents, we all have southern roots, but

we come from different places, different local cultures – she comes from New Orleans, I grew up in New York. Same with parents from the Americas, or from different parts of Asia.

Q&A

I gave you a lot of things to think about. No idea what you're thinking about. As parents, you have the opportunity of a lifetime to meet and work with all different kinds of people. And our children model our behavior.

Q: Do you offer workshops at schools?

Wenonah Valentine (WV): Yes.

Comment: At Roosevelt we have such diversity of parents, it would be great to have a workshop.

Q: Is this a part of regular teacher training in PUSD?

Theresa Doran (TD), PUSD Welcome Center: There is professional development, and this is offered.

Q: Offered, not required?

A: A few years ago, they did do something like this with principals. Don't know if they have done something like this since.

Q: In my life I have no problem talking about this stuff (Nora), but I was on my site council at my school, and when I would try to bring this up, everyone else was frightened, it was so hard to get anyone to address it together, and we need to get over it; we need to be able to talk to each other and make our voices be heard.

[Applause.]

A: We as parents have to decide we are sick and tired of tiptoeing around it. What was helpful in framing this workshop, was that in Pasadena, for those who lived here more than 15 years ago, are going to take you back to 1971 when the schools were desegregated. But people who are here now, it's important to hear the history, but this is your moment.

TD: This is our start. We have some focus groups at the District (Hispanic and African American), and I encourage you to join us in those conversations.

Q: What I find most disturbing is that most parents – most white parents – seem to feel o.k. with their children being in the schools in elementary, but after that they want to put their kids in private schools. Is my hand in the sand, are our middle and high schools that bad?

Nancy Dufford, PEN: The numbers don't bear that out, not as many people transfer out as people think. It's more of a curriculum issue than a social issue.

WV: I took my son out of LA and transferred in to PUSD for high school.

Q: My husband and I were from Mexico, but our son, people think he is from Asia, and that upsets him.

WV: As a parent, I am known as the expert on African-American history. As parents, we can be pro-active just by sharing our culture, bringing food, whatever. Don't spend a lot of time on ignorance. Help your child to know who he is by bringing what you know to his world, which is the classroom. Talk to your teacher about how you can contribute, you will most likely be welcome.