



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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An Individual Approach to Sharing Cultural Diversity

The Faculty/Staff Development Committee of San Diego City College discovered that one of the most successful means of encouraging understanding of our cultural diversity was felicitously also the cheapest and easiest to execute.

Our first attempts at developing multi-cultural understanding were to hire nationally known speakers—Shirley Chisholm, Luis Valdez, and Jaime Escalante. Although these speakers were outstanding and highly motivating, they were also expensive—and cost has become more of a consideration in times of declining funds.

The committee then tried a workshop approach. The college hired two experts in the field of multi-cultural understanding to conduct small group workshops on our campus. The workshop facilitators tried several approaches to encourage understanding of the problems and attitudes of people in other cultures. Unfortunately, their program turned out to be counterproductive. Several of our faculty members walked out of the workshop because, ironically, they felt that it reinforced cultural and racial stereotypes. There were rancorous meetings for several days after the workshop.

As a result of these experiences, the Faculty/Staff Development Committee gave itself the task of designing a creative program which would be cost-effective, promote intercultural understanding, break down stereotypes, and be interesting and fun.

The idea was to present cultural diversity from an individual point of view. As F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote in the introduction to his short story "The Rich Boy":

Begin with an individual, and before you know it you find that you have created a type; begin with a type, and you find that you have created nothing.

We decided to create a program which would begin with individuals. We would let the "types" fall where they may. Our plan was to select individuals from our college "family" who would make informal presentations on their own lives. We would not burden them with the responsibility of presenting the experiences of an entire culture. We would leave any generalizing to the audience.

To achieve this goal, we planned a series of presentations featuring people from our faculty, staff, and administration. Each presentation would center on one ethnic,

racial, or cultural group. The presentations would occur during FLEX weeks, which are periods set aside by colleges in California for faculty and staff development activities. In order to avoid competition between the groups, we scheduled only one presentation per semester.

We have completed three of these presentations so far. The first focused on Asians, the second on African-Americans, and the third on Hispanics.

Participants were asked to talk about themselves as individuals—to talk about their upbringing, their education, and their families. They were discouraged from discussing their ethnic background unless it had direct bearing on their personal lives. This was not to be a lecture on the Chinese in America, for example.

To make the presentations more concrete and lively, the participants were also asked to bring family pictures, short home videos, music, and ethnic food.

The first presentation was on Asians. The presenters were a Chinese-American automotive teacher who was born and raised in San Diego's Chinatown, located just a few blocks from our college; and a Vietnamese-American math instructor who came to the United States as a refugee. (Japanese-Americans were represented in a more formal presentation which occurred later in the day.) The presenters brought clothing, family memorabilia, objets d'art, photos, videos, and food. One of the presenters brought a Chinese dragon costume, which he and his two sons wear while performing Chinese dragon dances. The response to this first presentation was excellent. The people who attended commented about the warmth, fun, and informality of the session. The only negative comment was that there should have been more than two presenters.

The next session was on African-Americans. The committee selected five people from our faculty and staff—one man from British Guiana, another from Uganda, two women from rural areas in Texas, and one from urban Washington, D.C. Their presentation was upbeat. Although several of these people were activists in African-American campus and national issues, they held fast to the personal experience concept. They related experiences about their childhood, education, and current domestic lives. They brought in photos, videos, and



American soul food—using the food as a lesson on the history of African-Americans in the United States.

The third presentation was on Hispanics or Latinos. The participants represented many different nationalities, genders, and religions. They were men and women from the United States, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Argentina, with a variety of native American and European roots. They had Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish backgrounds. One of the major points made was that Spanish-speaking people are no more alike than are English-speaking people. Hispanics represent many nations, each speaking a variation on the Spanish language and comprising different mixtures of races, religions, and ethnic groups.

Our next presentation will be on Pacific Islanders. We plan to invite people with Filipino, Hawaiian, and other Pacific Island backgrounds.

As the person responsible for organizing the events, I encountered no difficulty in finding people to participate. Early on, the only minor difficulty was convincing

participants that other college faculty and staff would be interested. But because of the high attendance at the past three events, this is no longer a concern. As a side note, although the college was prepared to pay for the food, none of the participants requested reimbursement. One woman said that the warmth of the response was so overwhelming that asking for money would have ruined the experience.

From these presentations we learned that people from our own college family are at least as effective in presenting elements of cultural diversity as outside experts, and we can effectively learn about cultures through concrete experiences of individuals we know.

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Laughing Letters: Encouraging Results in Trades Classes

Basic business letter writing is a short module in Yukon College's Trades Communications, a course which also includes such serious business as writing personal resumé and videotaping mock job interviews. An instructional method, adapted from years of teaching English at all levels, has worked successfully with my classes of mechanics, surveyors, and carpenters.

I begin the unit by teaching the standard parts of a business letter, then format, tone, and writing style. The first assignment is to write a BAD business letter, for which I give full marks. There are two conditions: students may not be offensive in any way and must identify every "mistake." Some examples: letters written in pencil on three-holed lined paper; letters with half-inch top margins and three-inch side margins; letters full of spelling and punctuation errors.

The remainder of the assignment (a memo, thank-you letter, sales letter, complaint letter, and "bad news" letter) must be typed on a computer. The format and the mechanics of the letters must be error-free, but students are encouraged to use their wildest imaginations to create the content. Students who cannot use humor very easily are encouraged to write regular letters. There are always a few who choose the latter option, and both types are displayed on a large bulletin board in my classroom.

Some humorous examples: a memo advertising a special "Electro-Shock Injector" for a trades colleague who finds that his students fall asleep during math classes; a letter from a robot in the Milky Way galaxy complaining that the unit cannot predict the weather accurately because "the Senior Weather Creator suffers from Terminal Collision Syndrome." More realistic letters: complaints about the lack of student parking and plug-ins; suggestions for eliminating the noise coming from the carpentry shop; and creative ways to serve food in the cafeteria.

Unlike instructors in business courses who produce "real" scenarios, I have the luxury of encouraging laughing letters because the ultimate goal of my module is to learn the process and the rules for writing a business letter. A binder full of excellent student letters and the laughter I hear as students read each other's work is proof that these trade students have, indeed, learned the process of writing a business letter.

Mary Lou Smith, Instructor, Related Subjects

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