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Workshop Report: Celebrating Diversity

I enjoyed attending this semester's Celebrating Diversity workshop. I appreciated how the instructors helped me become more aware of the many groups that I belong to. The workshop gave me a chance to share what I already knew and felt about the topic, and it also helped grow my capacity for empathy. Thankfully, I encountered many realistic ideas of how I might celebrate diversity in my teaching career, both inside and outside the classroom.

I came to the workshop with a positive attitude, expecting to learn something new, but mostly expecting to confirm my existing beliefs, which I think are fairly tolerant. I expected to sit through the workshop feeling a bit guilty just for being Caucasian, middle class, and Christian—all aspects of the dominant U.S. culture. But I was surprised at how much diversity the instructors drew out of the roomful of Manchester College students. That was my first lesson/reminder: people are not necessarily similar because they appear similar, or just because you assume they must be similar to one another. Using several activities, we discovered new ways to look at each other. The instructors had us identify our ethnic background, but they did not start out by asking who traced their families back to Europe or Africa; they first asked who had Native American blood somewhere in their ancestry. Probably 20 people raised their hands. What a powerful lesson!

Besides discussing many expected categories such as race, language, sex, religion, and economic class, the instructors helped me understand that I belong to many other groups, such as: I am a mother playing a more-or-less traditional family gender role; I am a person with a deceased parent; I am a future teacher; and I am a person with mental illness in the family. The instructors did not only ask me to consider how I had experienced prejudice, but they also asked me to explain the *good* things about belonging in a given category. This exercise reminded me to count my blessings, and also to not feel sorry for people with minority status: they need respect, not pity, and they have much to be proud of.

As a side note, I must say that I loved the refreshments: sundaes with a *variety* of toppings. Very appropriate!

I was glad that the instructors provided training on what to do when we witness someone showing prejudice. Those situations will always be awkward no matter what we decide to say, but I liked how part of the goal of the training was to not embarrass the offender, but to help him or her respect differences while saving face.

The five-hour workshop covered so much valuable material. Next time, I think the instructors should also talk about how culturally sensitive people can properly deal with hard facts. We discussed how to overcome recordings, such as the idea that Native Americans are uneducated, poor, dirty, prone to alcoholism, etc. But as teachers, we have to understand the real obstacles that Native children face, but somehow without prejudging them. In theory, I don't believe any of those stereotypes. If, like my sister-in-law, I teach school near a Navajo reservation, I would be enriched by their contributions, and but would also be troubled by the problems they inherit. I hope I would begin from a position of humility and respect, but I would have to go beyond the (true) platitudes of a diversity workshop, and I'm not sure how I would do that.

Several thoughts came to mind when I reflected on how I might change for the better as a result of this workshop. The workshop inspired a new awareness of differences in economic class. I have friends with a different race, religion, and sexual orientation from my own, but I have no friends from the lower economic class. I will reach out to that population in two ways: 1) I will work with my seven-year-old son to include lower SES class student at his birthday party or other gathering. 2) From time to time, I will attend the semi-monthly Tuesday community soup supper at Zions Lutheran church, and instead of scooping out food for the patrons, I will sit down and eat with them.

With diversity on my mind, I wrote a letter to the editor that was published in the News-Journal. My letter addressed an anti-Islam film was to be shown in town on November 22. I felt especially motivated to say something, since this same group singled out my religion two years ago, and I appreciated those who stood up for me at that time.

Even though I might feel awkward and make mistakes while interacting with those who are different from me, my workshop experience confirmed I want to be counted as a person who respects and values others, especially anyone connected with my future classroom.