Celebrating Diversity

It is the nature of humanity to gossip. It is the nature of humanity to discern the characteristics of others. Finally, it is the nature of humanity to observe and critique that which differs from the norm. Often we are too concerned with determining into which identity groups others fall. We want to know another’s race, nationality, religion, age, economic class, physicality, or sexual preference. We desire this knowledge at the expense of grasping a sense of our own identity groups. Yet the Celebrating Diversity Workshop demonstrated that we must establish and appreciate our own identity before we can extend the same positive reception to others.

Two of the earliest activities at the workshop included the establishment of identity groups and group aerobics. Through interaction with a partner, I was required to list as many of my identity groups as I possibly could. Through this exercise I was able to discover many distinguishing traits of myself that were previously known to me on an unconscious level. I would never before have used them to describe myself, and they not apparent simply by looking at me, but they truly do define who I am. This appreciation for the self facilitates an appreciation for others. Underneath the surface of the individual lies a more complex and diverse person, someone whose diversity can never be fully admired unless we are willing to look beyond the topological identities. That process starts by first applying it to the self. In the group aerobics exercise, particular identity groups were called, and workshop participants were asked to stand if they fell into that
grouping. Again I learned things about people I would never have discovered otherwise. Before this activity my first internal reaction to the other group members may have been in connection to obvious identity groups such as gender and race. After the exercise I became much more interested in identity groups such as agnostics, ballerinas, saxophone players, and a handful of others lying behind the person that we initially see and judge. Before this can be applied to its full extent, one has to realize that others initially approach him or her looking at and critiquing merely the evident identity groups. This realization drives us to expose more of ourselves and therefore come to better understand others.

Using the previously described exercises, a teacher can value and respect his or her students. At the same time this teacher also longs to be respected by the students. In other words the teacher wants a good relationship with all of his or her students. Confronting prejudicial comments or jokes in the classroom could hurt the relationships. In the past I have been in situations where I let such comments go without action because I feared destroying a relationship I valued. I was unaware of any appropriate plan of action. Now my thinking has changed because I have gained various strategies for stopping prejudices while maintaining relationships. The main skills to master are listening and attempting to establish the origins of the prejudice. We should not immediately condemn another but let him or her come to the conclusion that what was said was probably not the most sensitive. This seems like an effective strategy for keeping positive and healthy relationships while eliminating those actions which may put the relationship in jeopardy in the first place.
Using any method previously described, the goal is now to create a classroom which celebrates diversity. The main goal of the teacher should be to establish a welcoming environment, one in which every student feels valuable and contributes to the learning atmosphere of the classroom. In the secondary schools, students likely will not be willing to discover their own identity groups and those of fellow classmates without some prodding by an authority figure. The teacher can use group work to encourage both a more productive learning experience and an appreciation for diversity.

The goal of celebrating diversity is to look past what identifies a person merely on the surface. If we concentrate only on these identity groups, we never truly know the person or experience the diversity each individual offers. How do we come to discover this diversity? We start with the self and the various identity groups to which we belong, and we must recognize that we have a lot to share beyond our surface appearance. Only then can we realize how much everyone truly has to bring to both the classroom and life experience.