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Professional Self-Development

Communicating with Hispanic and Minority Students: You can get by with Limited Language Skills, but Learn the Culture
Communicating with students is the most important professional development skill that teachers can improve.

Communicating in ways that build positive and trusting relationships is an independent variable influencing a teacher's success. Learning theory, discipline theory, management theory, and skill at using technology are OK; but theories and gadgets don't motivate students to learn to their potential.

What motivates students is a meaningful relationship with their teacher…a relationship based upon trust, confidence and communication.

But, what happens when teachers and students speak different languages. Languages are "Vocabulary Shallow" and "Culture Deep" The vocabulary of a different language draws attention to itself (in the same way that a cat draws attention to itself at a dog show). It is "up front and apparent."

But, vocabulary is only the surface level of a language, and like an iceberg, most of the mass (the culture) rides below the surface.

And, although learning the language of your students is a first step, the real relationship building starts when their teacher learns each student's culture. Sidebar Of course, when teacher and students use the same language, i.e., English, it is easy to assume that communication will occur naturally. But, as any teacher of African-American students can verify, the languages use the same vocabulary: but the cultures use different assumptions and meanings. Actually, there are really two (or more) different dictionaries; and therefore, the similar sounding words represent different vocabularies. A teacher's job is to teach the vocabulary of each content area subject. But, the road to increasing the content area vocabularies of students is paved with the culture of the language that students bring to school.

In fact, it is easier for a teacher to make the mistake of believing that he or she is communicating to students when the students use the same language and vocabulary, than when the teacher and students speak different Native Languages.

If the teacher speaks only English, and the student is a native Spanish speaker, it is easier for the teacher to recognize a communications gap than when both the "Middle-Class-English-speaking" teacher encounters a "Ghetto-Speaking" African-American student.

Whatever the native language or languages of the teacher and student, teachers must "get a grip" on the culture of each student, because culture is more important than language in building a trusting personal relationships between a teacher and his or her students. Study Students of Different Cultures by Listening Unfortunately, teachers cannot launch a Website or check out a library book and learn the principles of culture that will enable them to direct and motivate their students.

This kind of learning is "face-to-face, heart-to-heart," and listening to students is the ticket to the "trusting relationship game." Of course, the more the teacher knows about each student's native language, the more the teacher is able to comprehend the culture of each student. But this relationship building is more about interaction and mutual respect than it is about developing knowledge and theories. Socio-Economic Strata and Communication It would be nice (but shortsighted) to think that all students that speak the same language grow up in the same culture.

Take Spanish, for instance. There are 21 countries where Spanish is spoken as the primary language, and the United States just happens to be the country with the third-largest Spanish speaking population (soon to overtake Spain for second place) in the world. Spanish is the third most used language on the Internet (after English and Chinese); and Spanish is the third most influential language in the world (after English and French).

To assume that Puerto Rican culture (remember that Puerto Ricans are American citizens by birth and that Puerto Rico is an American Territory) and a Mexican American or Mexican immigrant all come from the same culture because they speak the same native language is to be "self-deceived."

However, some patterns of students' belief and behavior seem to transcend culture, e.g., students from the lower socio-economic groups demonstrate some similar characteristics.

Sidebar For example: Students from the lower socio-economic groups (White, Black, Hispanic, Native American) seem to exhibit similar school-motivation characteristics. These similar patterns of belief and behavior seem to include: A desire and preference for more immediate reinforcement and gratification

A desire and preference for tangible rewards

A lot of anger when punishment is delivered by anyone, especially from teachers who come from outside the native culture

A distrust for intrinsic motivation and a distrust for waiting to receive future rewards Teachers who listen to students "with an ear for language and a heart for culture" begin to understand their students on a level that builds a relationship of mutual respect. Brain Matters: Ditch the Theories When teachers bother to learn the culture of each of their students, a pattern of understanding and mutual trust evolves from the relationship.

This is a "learn as you go" type of on-the-job training that cannot be pieced together ahead of time. The cultural understanding that is based upon face-to-face and heart-to-heart interaction is idiosyncratic and does not fit into neat, theoretical packages.

This relationship building develops a "Higher-order Interaction Process" with a message-by-message (deductive rather than inductive) level of cultural communication.

The reason that this relationship process cannot be inductive (general knowledge, i.e., from theory to the particular) is that every student is unique.

It is only after gaining experience that is built from personal and individual interaction with students that a teacher earns the right to generalize cultural knowledge and form "compare and contrast" working hunches.

When teachers listen "person-to-person and heart-to-heart," and when teachers focus upon "higher-order understanding" of each student's culture during this relationship building, teaching takes on a "whole new" timbre, texture and twinkle that is impossible with theoretical analysis.

Take the time to learn the culture of each of your students. The tapestry of your teaching will become richer and more luxurious. Language Learning Resources Transparent Language Free Before You Know It™ Software Download Rosetta Stone Rosetta Stone Spanish (Latin America): Language Learning Software.

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