

What does it Mean to Be Culturally Competent?

Danielle De Roos

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Professor Woo

Revelation 7:9 says, "After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb." I believe that although every person may be a different race, ethnicity, language, or religion, their connection as the human race and even larger, the body of Christ, outweighs those differences. As a future educator, I want to teach in a district that aspires to accept and celebrate its extraordinary diversity. I want to strive to be the teacher that values the cultures, languages, and learning styles of my students and, in turn, I want to make my instruction as diverse and meaningful as possible so that it will become relevant for my entire classroom. It is so important as a Christian and as an American to want to learn more about other's cultures and beliefs. We should engage in valuing and respecting every person we come into contact with for themselves and not the outward appearance. Because the differences among us, the cultures, really matter.

Having the opportunity to attend a large public school since kindergarten is one experience that has shaped and molded my views of culture and diversity. It has caused me to have an extreme acceptance of all people and has helped me to lose some preconceived notions and ignorance about peoples and their differences. In high school, my group of friends was incredibly diverse. Of course I welcomed different races and ethnicities because I grew up immersed in classrooms where at times I was the minority. But a struggle of mine has always been accepting other religions because Christianity is so dear to my heart. My perspective changed drastically when I developed a circle of friends that all had contradistinctive religious viewpoints. I got to acquire knowledge of the Jehovah's Witness, Jewish, Mormon, Bahai, Catholic, and Buddhist faiths. I had to learn that although I did not agree with a majority of their beliefs, I had to accept them for who they were because they are also children of God even though they do not have personal relationships with Him. I look back now and wonder sometimes how my group of friends even came about and why these people were placed in my life. Now, at Trinity, I am surrounded with Christian believers for the first time in my life. I find myself wishing I would have been blessed with friends in high school that could encourage me in my faith like I

have now. But I know I would not be the same person I am today if I wouldn't have had the experiences of sharing my beliefs and learning to love everyone despite their various cultures.

Another experience that has molded my cultural competency was the senior internship I had at Pine Creek Elementary. Pine Creek is located dead center in some of the poorest neighborhoods in my city. This school has failed the state testing multiple times, not because of the teachers and staff, but because of the lack of parent support, socioeconomic status of the area, and the many language barriers apparent. It is a very diverse school and I seemed to end up in the most diverse classroom. I was placed in a 1st grade classroom, and when I did reading groups the ability level ranged from preschool to 6th grade. I learned a lot from my cooperating teacher because she had to brainstorm creative ways to accommodate these adverse learning styles. Other than the specific learning differences, 4 students were considered special needs, 10 students went to an ESL classroom everyday, 1 student was homeless, many students parents were divorced or separated, 2 students ended up being taken to child protection services for abuse, and 4 students were considered gifted. I feel this class displayed a healthy perspective of diversity. It can become frustrating sometimes when people think diversity is the color of your skin or the language you speak. It is so much more than that. In this class I learned more than I ever thought possible about teaching, acceptance, and accommodation.

There have been so many experiences in my life that have led me to where I am today with accepting culture. I have been on so many mission trips all over the United States. Some include, a homeless shelter in Boston, an Indian reservation in South Dakota, a kid's summer program in New York, an inner city ministry in Toronto, a food pantry and kids club in Nashville, Katrina relief in New Orleans and several small weekend trips to both Detroit and Chicago. Every one of these situations has led me to different cultures and different people. Every one of these situations has been influential in my growth as a Christian and as a culturally competent person in general. But the experience that has taught me the most was my trip to Rwanda last winter.

I took a leap of faith, got on my first airplane, and immersed myself in a completely different culture. They didn't speak the same language as us, they didn't use the same currency, they didn't eat the same food, they weren't time conscious, and they had different delicacies and different things that offended them. Basically, everything was different. I was scared for awhile because of all the horror stories I had heard about Africa. In all honesty I didn't trust the people. But the people in Rwanda taught me more about life, love, and Jesus than anyone I've ever been in contact with. Rwanda went through genocide just 10 years ago and the communities are still dealing with the pain. Yet surprisingly, they were incredibly joyful. It astonished me how through the language barriers and through the different life styles we could still connect on such an extremely deep level.

Diversity is such an asset to my life; it has changed me for the better. It is so important to be culturally competent. Understanding those people that live around you more than the color of their skin is necessary and beneficial to everyone's lives. Striving to value my student's cultures will only enhance and make my classroom a much better and more interesting place to be in.