

## PROMISING PRACTICE

# Exploring Culture, Acknowledging Stereotypes

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Contemporary students are increasingly entering college from diverse cultural backgrounds and with a myriad of identities, experiences, and perspectives. Educators, and especially educators that teach within the field of developmental education, must possess a comprehensive understanding of the range of challenges that their students encounter as the college years provide students with numerous opportunities for growth and development. Unfortunately, value in the varied characteristics of diverse student populations, especially for students that are most at-risk for college success, is often neglected, especially as it has a bearing on inclusion and equity (Hadley & Archer, 2017).

In my developmental writing courses, I often encounter students from diverse cultural backgrounds. I have observed that many of these students often see themselves differently from others, which may lead to negative perceptions of themselves. Students' negative self-perceptions are often internalized in the form of weak self-efficacy; thus, they may avoid challenging tasks, believing difficult tasks are beyond their capabilities (Cherry, 2020).

Students who are deficient in their own confidence to successfully perform a task are more likely

give up, avoiding the task altogether (Bandura, 1997; Stankov et al., 2014). This can be especially true for students enrolled in developmental education, as a large number of these students do not complete their coursework or programs (Bailey, 2009).

As an English instructor, I have witnessed the prevalent problem of weak self-efficacy among students enrolled in developmental writing. For support, I strive to empower my students from all sociocultural backgrounds. My personal classroom teaching experiences indicate that helping students recognize and appreciate differences—among themselves and others—has a grounding effect on the promotion of these concepts of inclusion and equity; it promotes the ideas that students are not as different or as much of an outsider as they may initially think, which in turn helps students to build their self-efficacy. (For more on creating and building inclusive classroom and teaching environments, see Mahlo, 2016).

One assignment that I have created to address this theme is focused on helping my students learn about culture and subsequent stereotypes. First, I provide class time on the topic of culture in open conversation. I ask students what this word means to them, and then I provide a basic definition: "The characteristic features of everyday existence (such as diversions or a way of life) shared by people in a place or time" (Merriam Webster Online, n.d.). My students are then able to explore the idea that each individual is actually part of many cultures, more than they would initially have considered. Religion or race/ethnicity are what so often comes to mind, but students are encouraged to dig deeper and explore those lesser-known cultures they may belong to, such as people who wear glasses, people who have red hair, people who are in a developmental reading and writing class. Discussion then opens to students talking about the unique cultures they belong to and what those shared characteristics may be.

Finally, the conversation turns to stereotypes faced within these various cultures. It is eye-opening for many students to learn that even those they might not consider being viewed through wrong assumptions and prejudicial stereotypes are, in fact, wrongly judged. My students come to understand that every single person may be seen incorrectly in some way. I continuously emphasize that these incorrect stereotypes must not influence their academic motivation because they do not define a person's social or academic identity (Daoud et al., 2018).

Each student is then given the task to interview someone else to learn about that individual's culture or cultures. They discover what it truly means to be a part of those cultures, including what false

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stereotypes are placed on them. I then assign students to write a brief essay on their discoveries. The ultimate goal is for my students to come to a cognitive self-awareness that they are not defined by stereotypes and thus should not define themselves in this way.

The end-of-semester qualitative course feedback suggests that this assignment has been tremendously valuable in the development of critical thinking as well as greater social awareness. Students have suggested that the ideas they explored around culture and stereotypes are easy to follow even though they had never considered these concepts before, at least in this manner. Completing this assignment has allowed my students to view their own roles as both unknowing abusers and victims of false stereotypes. Furthermore, the class discussions and assignment have reinforced my intended goal of helping students become aware that they all have unique characteristics that can be used to their advantage in sharing observations and experiences that others might not be aware of. In turn, students were opened up to an increased sense of ability for success. They learned that they may have challenges, possibly even unique or significant challenges, but also that their differences from other students may also become an asset.

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