

# **A Multicultural Mentor: An Inquiry**

**76-378**

Anne Pettengill  
12/8/1999

## **The Inquiry**

At the beginning of the semester, the class discussed about our role as mentors and what the teenagers we were working with would really need from us. Most of us voiced some concern that by telling our own stories we would be dominating the conversation and taking the focus off of the mentees. In fact, some of the mentors went as far as to purposely keeping information about themselves secret from the teens; they didn't want to build barriers between themselves and their mentees. In retrospect, I believe that we should have introduced our different background to them, that this is one of our most essential roles as a mentor. We can dispel stereotypes in teaching these teens not to take things for granted and to question themselves and their friends. In this inquiry I examine the diversity of my class and myself in order to elaborate on the different perspectives we as individuals brought to the CLC. I develop the history of conflict between my background and that of the teens, and I describe what I have learned from talking with the teens. As to my conclusions, I will try to introduce how we as mentors can model intercultural communication without taking the focus from our mentees.

## **Setting the Scene**

When I walked into 232C Baker Hall, I was feeling anxious and very uncertain of myself. The small room contained only two people, a posh redhead who looked to be about my age and a classy black woman in her 40s. I approached the woman and haltingly said, "Hi, my name is Anne Pettengill and I emailed you about enrolling in this course. I know I missed the first day, but....". The woman raised her hand to stop me and then said in what I later found to be her typical deliberate fashion, "I am sure it won't be a problem, but I am not Professor Flowers, I am a student." I flushed with embarrassment, murmured an apology and hastily grabbed a seat. As the seconds dragged on, four more students gradually entered the room and finally Professor Flowers came in and shut the door. Thus began my first class of Community Literacy and Intercultural Interpretation.

I had no idea what I was getting myself into on that first day or the relationships I would develop with my fellow classmates. After several weeks of training, we began our biweekly visits to the Community Literacy Center (CLC). All of the mentors rode together in a massive 15-seater van, which was driven by another mentor, Diane. It was on this van, and strangely enough not at the CLC, where I got to know my fellow mentors. None of us knew anyone else in the class at the beginning, but that quickly changed. We would gossip, vent, and talk about all sorts of things that you find yourself discussing among good friends. This 20-minute ride was an escape from school and from mentoring where we could release ourselves and just talk. I looked forward to these conversations with unique individuals with whom I found an unexpected commonality.

## **The Voice of the Mentors**

Each of the students in the Community Literacy classroom brought a different background and perspective to the table. One was black, two had been abroad exten-

sively, two were from small Pennsylvania towns, the list of differences go on and on. In order to demonstrate this plurality, I am going to briefly describe my fellow mentors, as I know them, but keep in mind this sketch is faulty and incomplete at best.

Frank is a graduate student who was doing research with Professor Flowers. He had recently come from Russia where he taught for the Peace Corps. Originally from a small town in the Midwest, Frank almost always had the right answer and was occasionally teased the teachers pet. He could draw anyone out into conversation, and was very straightforward about his feelings and reactions. He was also persuasive and supportive, I could tell him about any problem.

Jackie was the other graduate student in the class. She is black and in her 40's with a son who just moved with his wife to Texas. Jackie grew up in Pittsburgh and could tell us anything we needed to know about where our mentees lived and went to school. She was also a published writer; although her voice was quiet and slow, when she talked, everyone stopped to listen. She became famous for her words, "Let me tell you a story." She wrote about how she sometimes felt out of place with her younger classmates, yet her insight was invaluable to our conversations.

Diane was the youngest member of the class, a modest sophomore. She came from a well-off family in Seattle where she went to a glitzy private school. Her age never acted as a hindrance to her participation or to her wisdom. She had spent a summer teaching urban black students, and talked about her experiences there, which impacted her role as a mentor. Diane was generous and thoughtful; she always had the inside track on what was going on with the mentees.

Laura joined the class several weeks into the program. She was from a small town just outside of Pittsburgh and went to the women's college down the road from CMU. Laura was reserved and was very good at getting to the root of an issue. Her classes acted as a parallel to ones that most of the students in the class had taken, but she had a different spin on things. She was also very attuned to the interaction between the young men and women at the CLC as a student at an all-female college.

Meg also came from a small town outside of Pennsylvania, however, didn't share much in common with Laura. Meg was gregarious and demonstrative and could make anyone laugh. She would challenge her fellow mentors on their assumptions, and took everything to heart. Her strictly Protestant background came through in her arguments.

Jeff was the other male in the class; he was a real rebel. He had spent the past year abroad where he had decided that he was self-reliant, and required no external networks of support. His independence and dignity were characteristic of his comments. Jeff is from New Jersey, but his family is originally Italian.

Marie was the last member in the class. She is dramatic and spent much of her teenage years acting in a local theatre. She had very liberal parents who contributed

to her beliefs in the role of parents on teenagers' lives. She had taken a number of gender classes, so she was another member of the class who had a keen insight into that aspect of a teenager's identity.

## **Myself**

And then there's me. I am originally from Austin, Texas and I have four dazzling brothers and sisters (two of each). Both my parents are very well educated. I am also what I like to refer to as a Quarterrican. By this I mean my dad's mom is from Puerto Rico. She moved to the United States as a teenager in order to make money for her brothers to go to college. She married my grandfather and the family spent several years on the island before they returned to the United States. Now, I have always had a real conflict with identifying myself as Latino. This is probably because my skin is not terribly dark, and I have the last name of Pettengill, which is about as un-Spanish as a word can possibly sound. So, my Hispanic heritage is not something I talk about to any great degree, but it does relate to my identity. In order to maintain some aspect of this culture I chose to continue studying Spanish and eventually declared a double major in the language.

Growing up in Texas, the cultural atmosphere was quite the opposite of what it is here in Pittsburgh. There were a small handful of Black students at my high school, whereas the Hispanic population was overwhelming. In Pittsburgh, the urban student population is for the majority Black and there are only a very small number of Hispanics. The truth of this issue struck me when I first started mentoring at the CLC. I was uncomfortable at first because I did feel a certain racial dimension to my relationship with the teenagers. As the semester went on my questions grew about the differences between the Blacks in Pittsburgh and the Hispanics in Austin. They seemed to be of a similar social class, yet in talking with the teens at the CLC, I realized that there existed an absolute lack of knowledge about other races. So, I decided to focus my inquiry on asking about the relationship between Blacks and Hispanics as an example of the need for multicultural understanding and communication.

## **Blacks and Hispanics**

I once read a quote from some Southerner who stated, "Mexicans are niggers that don't talk plain." I would like to challenge the ignorance of this statement by discussing some of the unique differences between the Black and Hispanic cultures. To start off this cultural analysis, I am going to give a brief descriptive overview of predominant characteristics of both races. I would like to comment that these statements are very broad and are based on statistic evidence. They by no means apply to all members of the given race, nor are they meant to be taken as such. I would also like to point out at this time, that the Hispanic population I am discussing is more specifically the Mexican American population. They are the largest percentage of the Hispanics in the United States, and in talking to the teens at the CLC, the Mexican seemed to be the term and image they were more familiar with.

## **Blacks in the United States**

A prominent issue in Black America is the family structure. The supply of men able to support a family has been reduced by factors including high rates of unemployment, incarceration, and violence, conditions that are formed and perpetuated by the concentration of poverty in urban areas. There are higher rates of divorce, separation, desertion, and illegitimacy among African-American families versus the White majority. Female-headed families are much more common in the Black community, and these families tend to be poor because of the lower wages paid to minorities and minority women in particular. This lower income means that even the Black middle income family is more dependent on two incomes to maintain its standard of living. Black families also lag behind White families in financial resources other than income.

Black teenagers are also very much effected within the job market. In 1986 the official unemployment rate for Black teenagers ages 16-19 was almost 40%; whereas, in the same year employment for White teens within that age group was around 15%. The same trend continues in this decade. It is also interesting to note that black males typically have higher unemployment rates than black females, although the opposite is true for White males and females. In 1992 the percentage of unemployed teenagers looked like this:

- ❑ Black males was 42%
- ❑ Black females was 37%
- ❑ White males was 18%
- ❑ White females was 16%

(Healey) Some of the reasons projected for this gap in unemployment for Blacks are: lower levels of education, concentration in job-poor urban cities, lower seniority, and the concentration of Blacks in job positions that are more likely to become obsolete in the developing economy. The Black male concentration in the labor market is in labor that is semiskilled and service work.

There are also some pivotal cultural differences between Blacks and Whites in the United States. Centuries of cultural subordination and separate development (apartheid) have created a unique Black experience in America. African Americans share a Black language, religion, value system, and norms from within the dominant society. Ebonics, rap, the Baptists revival: all of these are closely associated with the Black culture. These distinct themes on general aspects of life in this country are portrayed through music, linguistic patterns, and cuisine (Piatt).

## **Latin Americans in the United States**

There are a number of significant cultural differences between Hispanics and the mainstream population. These differences may be more apparent than in the Black

population because the Hispanic population has a large number of immigrants every year, whereas the Black population is much less susceptible to increase in immigration. These differences are most apparent in religion, gender roles, and family.

The majority of the Hispanic population is Catholic as opposed to the predominantly white Protestant. Religion is a very important institution in the culture, although the actual practices vary from family to family. The emphasis placed on religion is apparent through the decreased numbers of divorces and abortions within these Catholic families. It is also important to take note that in some cases the Spanish Catholicism has been effected by the indigenous beliefs of the area which has also alters the way some Hispanic Catholics practice their religion (Mendel).

Another issue is the Latin American culture is the role of the male versus the female in society. Hispanics exercise a system of beliefs known as machismo in regard to gender roles. Machismo is a value system that stresses male dominance, honor, virility, and violence. This value system is intrinsically linked to the male and female identity. Machismo is passed down from generation to generation as children see it in their parents' relationship; they practice the same set of beliefs (Healey).

Compared to the White families in the United States, Hispanics place more value on family relations and obligations. Strong family ties are frequently the foundation of support networks and cooperative efforts for Hispanic individuals. They live in extended families, not just parents and children, but grandparents and even aunts and uncles. This societal value has sometimes been a source of conflict in the United States, however. In this country, society puts the emphasis on individualism and individual success, which contradicts the Hispanic tradition.

Hispanics are not like other immigrants. Like African Americans, they have been members of society, although perhaps not officially so, in the United States for hundreds of years. So, Mexican immigrants enter a pre-existing social system when they come to this country. The status of their group has already been established. The labor positions open to them were determined in most cases by paternalistic traditions and racist systems of over the past hundred years. This makes it difficult for both Blacks and Hispanics to change or challenge their positions in society.

### **The Relationship between Blacks and Hispanics**

As the two most dominant races that make up the class of poverty in the United States it is important to recognize how this poverty has effected these individuals and their society. Some of the leading characteristics in the culture of poverty include fatalism, orientation at present versus future, alcoholism, violence, authoritarianism, and high rates of family desertion especially for men. These characteristics are not only prevalent, but they also perpetuate themselves and the poverty that induces them. This makes it difficult for those in poverty to find and retain good jobs and better education and thus to effectively change their socio-economic status. It also increases

the likelihood of the teenagers in this environment to join gangs (Heath and McLaughlin).

The similarities in social and economic levels between Blacks and Hispanics have also lead to a development of competition and conflict between the two races. Instead of encouraging them to unite under common issues, the competition in the labor force has harvested this interracial conflict. Some Hispanics feel that Blacks get more attention to their political petitions and that Latinos have been overlooked(Piatt) On the other hand, a number of Blacks may argue that Hispanics have taken advantage of the liberties earned by the struggle of Black men and women; they are concerned that the growing Hispanic population will marginalize their needs. These social conflicts are made manifest through confrontations such as the race riots in Miami during the 1980s and on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1993 when Blacks and Latinos brawled in Washington D.C. These conflicts are aroused on issues ranging from economic competition to immigration concerns to language issues, and many others.

In looking deeper into these conflicts, there is an interesting correlation between the stereotypes held by one race for the other and vice versa. The stereotypes Whites have toward Hispanics are the same as the ones that Blacks hold for Hispanics. Similarly, the stereotypes that Whites hold for Hispanics are the same as those held by Blacks. In a study done in 1990, Mexican Americans rated themselves as more: hard working, smart with practical things, trustworthy, law-abiding, unfairly treated, and likeable when compared to Whites, Blacks, and Puerto Ricans. Mexican Americans believed that Whites were more: American, powerful, intelligent at school, and determined to succeed. Blacks on the other hand, were thought to be more aggressive or violent and more likely to stick together as a group. Mexican Americans agreed that of these races Blacks were the least like them. There is a remarkable parallel to this in the same study performed on African Americans. Blacks rated themselves as more: hardworking, American, smart with practical things, trustworthy, law-abiding, unfairly treated, and likeable. Hispanics in comparison were the least hardworking; American, similar to Blacks, intelligent at school, smart with practical things, trustworthy, law-abiding, and likeable. In this case, Blacks found Whites to be more aggressive and violent, though. (Lambert and Taylor). This data reflects the stereotypes and misconceptions that exist between these two races. And over time it is apparent that these stereotypes are still prevalent.

### **Taking this Data to the CLC: What the Teens had to say**

This research left me with a lot of questions unanswered. I saw the conflicts residing between Blacks and Hispanics, but I had no idea how those factors contributed to the lives of teenagers in Pittsburgh, or in Austin for that matter. How does a racial dialogue exist within the setting of a community conversation? So, I took these ideas to the ones with all the answers, the teens at the CLC. I took seven of these Black students aside to ask them questions about Hispanics and how they could compare/contrast this separate race to their own. The results I found startling and discouraging.

Only one of the teenagers I talked to knew what I meant when I used the term Hispanic. The other students seemed uncertain, so I elaborated using the term Latino and describing them as individuals from Central and South America without any luck. It wasn't until I mentioned the word Mexican that the other six were certain of my meaning. On further discussion, I found that one of the six had confused Hispanic with Indian when he referred to Hispanics as having special dots on their forehead. I was really shocked by this confusion, even though I knew very few Blacks as a child, I still knew who they were. So I probed deeper trying to establish exactly how much exposure these teens had to another culture. Interestingly enough, the one teen that knew who a Hispanic was, is the one who goes to a high school outside central Pittsburgh where Blacks are a minority.

In total, the seven teenagers knew three Hispanics. One was a Spanish teenager at a nearby middle school. The girl, Janet, who told me about this teacher expounded about some of the cultural practices (like the Day of the Dead) and different kinds of food. Another teen, David, had a neighbor who was Hispanic who had moved away. And the third Hispanic that one of these teens knew was a friend of a friend that they had met a couple of times. Now Pittsburgh has by no means a significant Hispanic population, so this information was not a surprise.

When I initially asked the teens if they could think of any stereotypes that applied to Hispanics they all said no. However, most agreed that Hispanics were more likely to be in gangs than Blacks. One of the teens mentioned all Hispanic neighborhoods in large cities where you would be beat up if you were on their street and not Latino. However, this young man argues that Blacks do not live together, but spread out in comparison to Hispanics. These words reinforced my greatest fears: ignorance does breed prejudice. These teens were reflecting very similar sentiments to those expressed by Black and Latin communities that I discussed earlier. A lack of exposure is no reason to hold prejudice. It didn't seem that these judgments were shared by their family, but seemed to be ideas that teens had heard on the street and from television.

### **Putting it all Together: The Mentor's Role**

So, how does this information effect the mentors? What does it mean? I have discussed the relationship between Hispanics and Blacks because that is one that my identity is most linked to. At the beginning of the paper when I discussed the other mentors who made up the class, I attempted to bring up intrinsic facets of their identity that they have to contribute to a community conversation. Instead of writing about the Hispanic identity in comparison to Blacks, I could have been writing about Russians, the experiences of older Blacks to younger, White women, Italians, wealthy, East United States versus Western, and a combination of other factors. These are issues that these other mentors have experience with and could write about.

Perhaps if I had introduced my Quarterrican self with the teens at the CLC I

would have changed some of their stereotypes. They could meet another (or their first, in some cases) Hispanic and realize that this different race wasn't something out of "West Side Story," but an individual with individual experiences. Not all Latinos are the same, just as not all Blacks are the same or have the same experiences. On the rivaling perspective, perhaps this introduction would not have changed their perceptions at all. So they have met one Hispanic they have something in common with that breaks the stereotype, that one person could be the exception to the rule. At least then I could have introduced to them the speck of doubt in their judgments or could have introduced them to another culture first hand.

At the beginning of the class we, for the most part, decided that we didn't want to tell our stories but give the teens an opportunity to tell theirs. However, my point is that by keeping silent we deprived the teens of one of the reasons for mentoring. We gained a new perspective through our experiences with them, and they learned that college kids are fun. We may have boosted their self-esteem, improved their writing skills and made them more aware of conflict resolution. However, by removing our identities from the equation we didn't give these teens the opportunity to learn a new perspective, which is the real reason for rivaling.

### **How we can be Multicultural Mentors**

So all this high-minded talk is all very well, but what do we do about it? How can we introduce our identity and multiculturalism in a setting such as the CLC? Hopefully, I can use my experiences as a stepping stone for future mentors to identify and respond to this issue, otherwise this paper is without merit. By reading about these experiences and this racial background, future mentors may choose to use the techniques we learned and read about in class to introduce their individuality to the teens.

Use rivaling. Instead of making up goofy "what if" extremes, use your own experiences to draw a parallel that is uniquely your own. Use the cultures you know as a foundation for the rivals you introduce. For example, the following story came up by one of the females in the classroom one day:

My boss over the summer was terribly unreasonable. One day he came into my office and pointed out an error that he said I had made in one of my documents. I knew that I had not made this mistake and told him so at which point he got even angrier and stormed out of the office.

As a Hispanic, I could have rivaled the position of the employer by saying he may be using his beliefs in machismo. He might thus assume that the young woman had made the mistake and that although he was being unfair, it might be a part of his culture that would make it difficult to acknowledge that the young woman was right whereas he was wrong. In this manner, a cultural reflection within an everyday situation may be revealed.

Another way to include a multicultural dimension in a community conversation is using your story behind the story to describe some of the differences between yourself and your mentee. These differences between two different races or cultures can also contain commonalities. I can think of one of my own stories as an example.

When I was a freshman at Carnegie Mellon, after talking to some of my fellow freshmen, I no longer felt like the smartest kids in the class, far from it. I wasn't doing all that well in my classes, and I was very withdrawn.

The story behind the story is that I felt that I had gotten into the school because of my Puerto Rican heritage, and I feared that perhaps I couldn't have gotten in on my own merit. This drastically dropped my self-esteem and my performance in school suffered.

Now in order to avoid that internal conflict, I no longer fill out any sort of ethnicity forms for school or employment.

Although the teens have not been in this situation, they may have faced the same fears that I did in this story. My mentee might have found this story as proof that I could understand some of the problems she has confronted and that Hispanics and Blacks have something in common.

## **To Conclude**

The opportunities at the CLC are vast, and to use them fully we mentors should involve our selves entirely in the process. To introduce these teens to something different, to another way of thinking will make them better, more informed decision-makers and perhaps help in the development of their professional relationships. It may be intimidating for mentors to bring up race, but doing so indirectly may lead to a conversation where racial issues are brought out to the open. To challenge and engage these teens we are providing them access to a higher level of learning and understanding than what they may learn in the classroom and on the street.

## **Bibliography**

Flower, Linda. *Problem Solving Strategies for Writing in College and Community*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1998.

Healey, Joseph F. *Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in the United States*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 1997.

Heath, Shirley Brice and Milbrey W. McLaughlin. *Identity & Inner-City Youth Beyond Ethnicity and Gender*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1993.

Lambert, Wallace E. and Donald M. Taylor. *Coping with Cultural and Racial Diversity in Urban America*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1990.

Mindel, Charles H., Robert W. Habenstein, and Roosevelt Wright, Jr. *Ethnic Families in America Patterns and Variations*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1998.

Piatt, Bill. *Black and Brown in America*. New York: New York University Press, 1997.