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Introductory Activity

To introduce a unit on cultural conflict that would promote empathy among groups, a teacher could look to current and historical events in which people have expressed negative views about the people of another social group. The teacher could prepare or adapt a set of actual statements, such as those that follow, and have students consider the statements in terms of how cultures tend to view one another in threatening or diminishing ways. This inquiry would inevitably be founded on students' reflections on their own identities, as detailed in Chapter 1. The statements could be accompanied by a set of questions that help the students look at the speaker's positioning in relation to the group in question.

This activity, like much of what we offer in this book, is sure to produce emotional responses in students. Teachers need to be aware of these consequences and be prepared to handle pain or conflict among students in discussions. When students' emotions become more explicit in their thinking, teachers might introduce rules of engagement. Students might be cautioned that no matter how emotionally they might disagree, they need to maintain some sense of respect and propriety. They might be cautioned to avoid insults, name-calling, reductionist accusations, and other actions that work against productive exchanges. They might be encouraged to rephrase viewpoints different from their own in ways that demonstrate understanding, if not agreement. They might be encouraged to think about how ideological differences may be both emotionally damaging and also the source of empathic growth.

Teaching to address social issues does entail risks. Teachers undertaking it should understand in advance that when they encourage students to express their emotional attachment to ideologies, the teacher's role shifts to managing the affective thrust of their beliefs in conflict. Achieving social justice isn't easy. These discussions may produce emotions that have remained muffled during academic discussions of texts. It takes a bit of courage to invite these emotions out into the open, and it takes some skill to manage them when they inflame students' opinions.

One way to introduce the unit would be to prepare the students for their inquiries with a broad statement, such as the following:

As we get into discussing these quotes, remember that we all belong to particular cultural groups. Also, because everyone has a cultural bias, it's important to recognize that each of you will read these quotes through your own cultural group membership and beliefs. You will then take an active approach to remembering how everyone reads with implicit bias.

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Reading the following quotes without attention to other people's feelings can strengthen negative views of groups of people in society who are already devalued. Some of the quotes you are about to read may open emotional wounds. It is very important to acknowledge those feelings as part of the learning process. Understanding these emotions can help develop the possibilities for empathic connections that may help reduce conflict between groups.

The teacher could then distribute the following instructions and quotes:

Read each of the following statements, which are adapted from news stories. For each quote, consider the following:

1. Who is likely the speaker, and what group of people is the speaker talking about?
2. What is the point of view of the speaker? Through what lens does the speaker see the people spoken about? What assumptions does the speaker make about the people being described? What is likely the basis of those assumptions? To what degree are these assumptions accurate? If they are inaccurate, why?
3. People have often said something similar to what Arlene Jones wrote in 2015: "In every racial stereotype there is a tad of truth. Those who are the recipients of the stereotyping don't like to admit it because to do so is to give credence to whatever images abound for that group." Do you believe this statement to be true? Do you find it true in the statements that follow?
4. How might the speaker's observation be reconstructed if it were spoken by the people being spoken about or by a person representing another perspective?
5. What is the difference between the speaker and the people spoken about in each item? What is similar?
6. What are the consequences of the conflict on both groups?
7. How might better understanding through empathy be achieved by each group in relation to the other? What feelings would need to be addressed in order for understanding to be achieved and equitable relationships to be established?
8. If there are perceived risks to those who extend empathy to people from outside their own kinship groups, what are those risks, and why are they risky? What might be the consequences of extending empathy to those from other groups in ways that jeopardize one's standing with one's own cultural group?
9. Do you see yourself as a member of the cultural group of the speaker, or a member of the cultural group of the subject, or as a different group entirely? What is your emotional response to hearing a speaker of the cultural group to which you belong making these statements? What is your emotional response as a member of the cultural group being spoken about?

Consider these questions as you read and discuss each of the following statements:

- I don't feel sorry for people who get sick during a pandemic. Everybody knows how to avoid the virus. If you catch it, it's because you refused to believe the facts, and you put yourself in danger. That's your problem, not mine.
- My great-great-grandparents were legal immigrants, so my family belongs here. These people crossing the border now are illegal and ought to go back to where they came from. All they do here is commit crimes and take our jobs.
- Poor people are poor because they don't have the grit and gumption it takes to get hired and work hard. Why should I pay more taxes to support people who won't help themselves?
- I am opposed to my school district's new "diversity, equity, and inclusion" plan. All diversity does is create divisions and problems. If people want equity, they should start earning it.
- I don't want my kids to learn in school about history that makes them feel bad about who they are. Life's tough enough for them. Why learn to be guilty about things that happened to other people long ago, as if my kids are responsible for the problems now?
- We need strict dress codes in school so that girls don't wear outfits that distract boys. Boys are already hard to manage, and the last thing they need is a girl's exposed body making it impossible for them to concentrate on their studies.
- I was glad to see a wrestling referee make a competitor cut his hair before competing. Long braided hair isn't appropriate and can be very intimidating to people who are properly groomed. It's about time we laid down the law on how male athletes wear their hair.
- People are sent to jail because they are criminals, and then they complain about prison conditions. Why should I care if their food is bad and the guards are mean to them? Prison is a punishment, not a vacation.
- People today are so weak. Every time they feel bad about something, they go to the doctor and get happy pills so the problems will all go away. The world is a hard place, however, and they will never be prepared for challenges if they don't know how to face them on their own.
- Every U.S. president has been a male. That's because men are the wisest, most emotionally stable people we have. We need common sense, rationality, and a true understanding of the nation's founding and history and should stop any social experiments with other kinds of people in leadership roles.

Students could work either independently or in small groups to discuss these statements in light of the guiding questions and then the class could discuss them as a whole group. Inevitably, their own reflections on their identities, as outlined in Chapter 1, would provide a starting point for considering how other people treat those different from themselves. The purpose of the activity is to have students analyze a point of view and understand its basis and to consider its consequences for the people being talked about, for themselves, and for others. As an alternative, each group could focus on one quotation and then, in jigsaw fashion, the students could be redistributed into new groups in which one “expert” from each group presents their group’s case and generates a discussion about it, with each case explored in this fashion.

Students then might write informally about one or more of the issues that came up in their discussions, perhaps in relation to a prompt such as this:

Empathy refers to a person’s capacity to appreciate or share the feelings of other people, especially when they are under stress and in need of understanding. Reflect on the issues raised during our discussions. What is preventing the speaker from feeling empathy for the people being spoken about? Would it make any difference if the speakers had empathy for the people they spoke about? What factors have helped to produce the feelings of ill will? How might people reduce conflict in a world in which people have historically viewed outsiders to their own cultures as threatening or to be degraded?

This writing could generate further discussion, either in small or large groups. The teacher’s role would be to listen, perhaps to serve as recorder, and to orchestrate participation.

This introductory activity sets the stage for students’ explorations of the nature of cultural conflict and the role of empathy in helping to create understanding. It could generate further writing of personal narratives, comparison/contrast essays, argument essays in service of a point of view, journalistic descriptions of events, or other genres. It could produce art or other graphic compositions representing events or perspectives or other forms of interpretation. To prepare for such possibilities, students might engage in a role-playing activity in which groups of students consider the perspectives of people engaging in a cultural conflict as a way to dramatize the ways in which people do and do not try to understand how people they consider adversaries feel about coming into contact.