

Unit on Understanding and Embracing Diversity

When and Why: Present this unit early in the year. Understanding and celebrating individual differences in the classroom enhances group work and student collaboration. It is the foundation on which to build a classroom community.

Initiate: Discuss diversity in terms of culture, family structure, and learning. Identify racial and ethnic percentages in the community in which the school is located and talk about how they have changed over time. Introduce various family structures by having each student identify each member of their family. Tell students that the classroom inquiry and activities in this unit are centered around diversity.

Teach/Model: State that cultural diversity was integral to the founding of the United States of America. Families of various kinds arrived at Ellis Island from many parts of the world speaking many different languages. Lots of people did not understand one another.

In a discussion with a group of adult colleagues (perhaps the teacher in the classroom next door, a special educator, a bilingual teacher, a speech teacher, a social worker, a counselor, a para-educator, a school secretary, a janitor), reveal your and your colleagues' cultural histories and backgrounds, the families in which you grew up, your families now. Allow students to ask questions.

Next, tell students that additional aspects of our diversity are the strengths and challenges we have in learning. These strengths can be thought of as gifts and these challenges can be thought of as disabilities, and everyone in the world has both. Then have the same group of colleagues discuss your various learning strengths (gifts) and challenges (disabilities).

Guided Practice: Have students talk about what they observed you and your colleagues doing during your discussions. Tell them they are now going to have a similar discussion with a small group of their classmates.

Collaborative Practice: Divide students into groups of five. Give each group the following handout itemizing procedures for their discussion

1. Appoint:
 - A facilitator, who will initiate the discussion and ensure that everyone participates.
 - A recorder, who will write down each group member's answers to the questions in step 10. (This group self-assessment will be turned in at the end of the discussion.)
 - A sharer, who will summarize your discussion orally when the whole class reconvenes.
 - A media master, who will help each group member create an individual graphic profile of his or her cultural background, family structure, and learning strengths and challenges.
 - A publisher, who will, in collaboration with the publishers from the other groups, summarize this activity in a blog entry on the class website.
2. With the facilitator's guidance, have each member of your group share his or her cultural background, especially things that are unique.
3. With the facilitator's guidance, have each member of your group share her or his family structure, especially things that are unique.
4. With the facilitator's guidance, have each member of your group discuss his or her strengths and gifts, especially things that are unique.
5. With the facilitator's guidance, have each member of your group discuss her or his challenges and disabilities, especially things that are unique.