Part 1 – Cultural Autobiography

Culture for me is black and white; not in the sense that it is one thing or the other, but that I have two completely different cultural upbringings from opposite ends of the spectrum. My parents divorced when I was very young so my life has always been split in two. My mother is from a small, rural town in Tennessee. She is open-minded, laid back, and almost a free spirit. My dad, on the other hand, is from a first generation Italian family who emigrated from Italy to Chicago, Illinois. He is very traditional, family oriented, and slightly inflexible. Growing up mostly with my mother, I lived in a culturally diverse area all of my life. I spent most of my years in schools where white people were slightly the minority. Because of this, I was taught to be respectful of other peoples’ customs and traditions. To the contrary, I inherited the inflexibility of change and structure from my dad. I am very respectful of other cultures and have, at times, found myself curious enough to research things, but I am traditional and inflexible to the point of holding onto my own cultural identity, despite sometimes connecting or relating to others. I am certainly proud of my own cultural values and beliefs, no matter how I developed them, but I would never put down another person because they are different than I am.

Part 2 – Selecting a Cultural Immersion Experience

Because I was taught to be respectful and open-minded, I initially had trouble picking an event that would immerse me in a culture that was uncomfortable. After doing some thinking and some research, I chose to attend a Narcotics Anonymous (NA) meeting. A regular sobriety, addiction, or alcohol program would not do the trick for me. While I have never had a problem with alcohol or some other addiction I have known others who have, so I knew it would not be uncomfortable enough. While I was raised to be unprejudiced, I cannot bring myself to be tolerant or acceptant of drugs. It is hard to
understand what happens in a person’s life to drive them to try drugs. Even worse are the things a person addicted is capable of doing while on drugs, or to get drugs. And despite my parents’ different backgrounds and parenting styles, neither one would support me if I were to do drugs.

I thought that attending a meeting where I would be surrounded by drug addicts would make me feel highly uncomfortable. Based on what I read and what others have said about NA and similar meetings, I expected to see a handful of people, either struggling with addiction or recovering from addiction, stand up and talk about their lives, what kind of addictions they have, why they decided to attend the meeting, and things of that nature. I knew I would not be speaking out loud, except for introducing myself to the group leader or instructor.

Part 3 – Cultural Immersion Experience

The NA meeting was scheduled for 7:00pm on a Friday evening. It was held in an empty warehouse building in a run-down business complex in the “not-so-nice” portion of town. I was uncomfortable before I even got out of my car. There was a group of at least ten individuals outside smoking cigarettes before the meeting officially began. Inside the warehouse was another ten individuals waiting patiently. The people were as young as eighteen and as old as sixty. The group was about equal as far as men and women, as well as black and white. The warehouse had two rooms in it. The entrance room had a small couch that had been around a while and a corner piled with various baby items. The smaller room went into a hallway, where the less than clean bathroom was, and entered into a large room. The large room was the meeting room. It was filled with all kinds of chairs and couches for people to sit. One wall was entirely covered in writing from people who had signed their names, dates of sobriety, and many other messages.

The first person to speak to me was the group leader. He introduced himself to me, and asked what my addiction was. I told him I did not have an addiction, but that I was hoping to sit in for a school research project. He said that I was more than welcome and was glad I chose to come. Once he began the meeting, he started with the Serenity prayer, which was also posted on the wall for any new comers who did not know it. After the prayer, he told the group his story of addiction, how he overcame it, and that he
has been sober for eleven years. He welcomed anyone else who wanted to speak to tell their stories. The first couple people who spoke had similar stories of addiction where they began doing drugs recreationally as teenagers and it escalated to the point of getting them into legal trouble. They had all maintained their sobriety since they started attending meetings. One women spoke that had been recently addicted for the first time and got caught at a traffic stop with drugs in her pocket. She spent a year in jail, lost custody of her children, and had only been out of jail for two months. This was her first meeting, and she was desperate to turn her life around and get her children back. Most of the speakers were older; the younger members participated less.

After everyone who wanted to speak got a turn, the leader announced a bathroom and smoking break. While some people went to the restroom and went outside to smoke, many people introduced themselves to the new members who had not attended before. Several people talked to me. They were slightly surprised to find out I was there for a school project, and not an addiction, but they were all very welcoming. They explained that this was a typical meeting and told me about who the other regulars were, and a little more about the leader. Apparently the leader’s daughter was due to have a baby any day so the baby items piled in the front room were things others had donated for her.

Once the break was over and everyone returned, the meeting resumed. The leader talked about things to avoid to help keep people out of trouble. He discussed various volunteer opportunities around town for the following week. An announcement of more upcoming meetings was made. The meeting concluded with a chance for questions; nobody had any. As everyone was leaving, the leader personally spoke to them on their way out the door and gave them a brochure with the meeting schedule.

Part Four – Cultural Awareness

My feelings upon arriving at the meeting were significantly different than how I felt leaving. When I arrived and saw all the people standing outside, my first thought was not judging them, although I think I unconsciously did. My first thought was how they would judge me; I am a young, pregnant woman, alone, and clearly look as if I do not belong in that part of town, let alone a meeting for drugs. I was extremely nervous just to walk through the group of people standing outside just to go in. Once I
went in and the leader welcomed me, I felt a little better. He was genuinely happy I chose to come to their meeting. After hearing his story about how he managed to get sober, and then spent the last eleven years trying to help others get sober, I felt guilty about feeling uncomfortable.

After listening to the others talk, especially the woman who lost her kids, I realized that I was still thinking of these people as drug addicts and criminals, and not as people who have moved past that life and were trying to get help. While a few of them were there just because the court ordered them to attend meetings, most of them have spent the last few years fighting themselves and everything they know to maintain their sobriety. The people were not weak and immoral; they are struggling to stay strong no matter what they are faced with. They live one day at a time and use whatever support system they have to. The ones who have been sober longer are following the example of the group leader; they want to share their stories in hopes of helping someone else recover from addiction or prevent them from ever getting an addiction to begin with.

As far as cultural competency goes, this was an interesting experiment. I believe I went into the meeting as stage three of cultural competency. I was aware that there was a cultural difference between the meeting members and myself, but I did not account for the cultural differences between the different meeting members as well. I went into the experience with my own set of beliefs and judgments. I knew I would need to be open-minded, but it is hard to actually put it into action when you feel surrounded by something uncomfortable before you can even get out of the car.

After the meeting, I think I am somewhere between stages four and five of cultural competency. I acknowledge the cultural differences, but I now know that it is not always a bad thing. People from all different backgrounds and cultures can deal with the same issue. On the other hand, people from the same backgrounds can have completely different experiences. The importance is not the things that the people have done, but how they are handling it from this point forward. I believe I am in stage five in the sense of exploring and understanding the issues that a cultural group has to face, but I am not actively doing something to make a difference which still puts me somewhere around stage four. I do not know if I will ever actively do something about the differences, but I hope to reach a point where I can celebrate them.
Part Five – Application to Practice

I think this project as a whole will be very valuable for teaching. Each student will have a different background that we will not know as a teacher. Students who may seem similar can be completely different. Students who seemingly have nothing in common may have more than meets the eye. It is our job as a teacher to embrace all of our students, despite their differences, and make sure we do everything we can for each one to get the most from their learning experience. As a teacher, if I have a class of extremely diverse students, I can do activities and assignments to share the students’ culture with the rest of the class. If I have a class that is not very diverse, I can have the students do research on other cultures they do not know a lot about. No matter what kind of cultural situation I have in my classroom, I will do my best to make sure my students are open-minded about other cultures. I hope to impact my students with cultural diversity the way I have been inspired by my own learning experience in this course.