

Important copyright information: Please download no more than one copy of this product. Note also that the WestEd copyright applies to the downloaded version of this document, and it may not be reproduced.

Sharon Nelson-Barber

A Comment on Culture

When I first agreed to comment on cases in environmental education, I was eager to respond to the variety of issues that I imagined might arise for environmental educators who work in diverse cultural communities. As a cross-cultural educator, I do not work directly in this field; however, my research in the Alaskan bush has positioned me to observe firsthand the practical intersection of environmental literacy and cultural diversity. In the harsh and remote context of rural Alaska, Yup'ik Eskimo villagers practice a subsistence lifestyle that is rooted in a profound respect for and spiritual connection with their ecosystem. Instruction about the environment begins at a young age and is typically hands-on. Youth are asked to closely observe their surroundings and to draw on prior knowledge to solve problems. Though there is an emphasis on correctness – because mistakes have survival consequences – there is sufficient time for private practice before proficiency is expected. Over time the process of observation, groupwork, and apprenticeship yields competent individuals who have mastered the requisite critical-thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving skills that will sustain them and ensure their longevity as a people – a truly authentic environmental education.

There are clear similarities between these time-honored approaches to teaching and learning and current research-based instructional techniques in which concepts are taught in meaningful contexts and students are encouraged to take responsibility for their learning (Trumbull, Nelson-Barber, & Mitchell, 2002). I imagined drawing parallels between subsistence communities' strategic use of local context and the successful approaches brought to light in the cases. However, as I began to digest the various dilemmas described by each author, I quickly saw that these issues had less to do with responsive pedagogy or recognizing the excellence that students might demonstrate in unique ways. They were all about the political, social, and cultural systems that encompass particular values and expectations about teaching and learning. And it was the sorting out of these kinds of distinctions that the authors of the casebook found most challenging.

An Insight Into "Biophobia"

One author's experience managing her East African students' "biophobia" made her keenly aware of "the different lens" that most of her students used when viewing the

environment. An early enthusiasm to infuse hands-on environmental activities and concepts across her curriculum was soon tempered by students who were “conditioned to kill living things they found in their house or compound” because they were taught that “such things could harm them.” Understanding that her students had been socialized to fear living creatures for practical reasons – we’re talking “snakes, crocodiles, and hippos” – this teacher recalled her successes in previous classrooms where she used thematic units to engage students’ experiential knowledge and to help reshape their thinking. Remembering the personal satisfaction she herself derived from physically interacting with chimpanzees at an animal orphanage where she volunteered, the teacher set about arranging a similar opportunity for her students, even fine-tuning personality matches between the children and the chimpanzees they would “adopt.” Still, despite laying meticulous groundwork, which included weeks of preparatory study across the curriculum, the students did not care even to approach the animals when they met.

Of course the teacher comprehended this intellectually. Having worked in Africa for several years, she “sensed that many of the African students were still close to their traditional values and customs,” and she understood, “in theory, at least,” that this relationship to nature and certain learned behaviors helped “preserve people and their culture over time.” However, for any teacher in the throes

of organizing such an effort – revisiting one’s own learnings, arranging a site, developing a progression of lessons, and so forth – what can be missed is the steadfastness of the students’ systems of belief.

We know from the literature that sociocultural background influences beliefs, values, knowledge, and experience (Luria, 1976; Rogoff, 2003; Solano-Flores & Nelson-Barber, 2001; Whorf, 1956). Collectively these influences impact a person’s acquisition and expression of knowledge, which, for students, also surface in the styles of learning they bring to the classroom. Although this class was composed of “a mix of the urban privileged,” who had a “pretty good grasp of English,” many of the African students in the class spoke English as a second or third language. So in the midst of working to foster in her students “care and concern for the environment,” the teacher was additionally needing to weigh their capabilities to understand and communicate their ideas. However, even when students are proficient in English, their sociocultural backgrounds still influence their behaviors and motives, which, in this case, materialized in the teacher’s view as “biophobia.”

It became clear that, despite her own enthusiasm for the activities, the teacher seemed to presume too much potential for common ground between herself and her students. Even though her students may have regularly experienced some blending of Western and traditional practices, taking in

“new” understandings would not necessarily mean forsaking what they already believed. In rethinking what she had come to understand about her students’ cultural knowledge, the teacher concluded that “interaction with a large, ‘sexy,’ endangered species” was hardly sufficient to reverse “the learning stemming from the socialization process.”

What Contributes to “Toxic Disinterest”

The need to understand communities’ underlying cultural knowledge is similarly the focus of “Toxic Disinterest?” – which includes an account of a local government’s insensitivities to its diverse constituencies. First, after reading a newspaper editorial about the “irresponsible behavior” of local Hmong who were “eating fish caught in the...polluted harbor,” the author, as the director of a multicultural center, was incredulous that warning signs posted around the harbor were printed only in English. Not only were snide remarks circulating in the community, but worse, when the author confronted an official from the agency responsible for managing the harbor, he was greeted with a cavalier attitude – “We put signs up.... Isn’t that enough?” Implicit in such a remark is the assumption that anyone who cannot read English will find someone to translate, though the comment more likely suggests that everyone *ought* to speak and read English.

Though images of “melting pots” and “salad bowls” are continually summoned in

celebration of our nation’s diversity, there is lack of understanding about what honoring linguistic and cultural differences really means. The rhetoric of “English-only” initiatives and “Ebonics” controversies has led the general public to accept a narrow interpretation of what counts as “good” English, how language is learned, and, in general, how language works. Such misperceptions feed into fears that accommodating students with differing abilities means “watering down” education as a means to improve academic achievement. And most alarming, as the author discovered, the inaccurate and negative assumptions are intermixed with language and ethnicity and become insurmountable barriers to mutual understanding.

The fact is that locating opportunities to acquire the kinds of experiences that lead to an increased understanding of differing cultural perspectives is difficult. Reading about other cultures and visiting diverse settings is certainly a start. But there is no substitute for real, face-to-face, meaningful interaction with those you wish to learn about. In this case, the author was able to reflect on his own experiences working with the Hmong, which reminded him of a very important characteristic – their determination “to keep their original cultural ways alive.”

Though these agrarian people have adroitly adapted to the urban environments in which most have found themselves after immigrating to the U.S., historically, no

matter how oppressive the colonizer, they have absolutely rejected assimilation – something that Fadiman (1997) characterizes as the “stubborn strain in the Hmong character which for thousands of years has preferred death to surrender” (p. 51). Being faithful to Hmong cultural maxims means honoring particular practices, such as animism, but also adhering to specified norms of interaction organized within a traditional Hmong hierarchy. Fadiman (1997) further explains that this system dictates the social ranking of individuals (men above women, elders above youth) that includes responsibilities for problem-solving and decision-making. Although English and Hmong literacy levels are increasing among immigrants, the elder population, who also hold the most status, remain largely illiterate (Rai, 2003).

Imagine, then, that a younger person reads the “no fishing” signs. Fadiman (1997) suggests that correct protocol would dictate something like this: the youth would tell her mother, the mother her husband, the husband his elder brother, the elder brother the clan leader, and the clan leader higher level individuals, who would then communicate that an important message be sent to the community. So even though the posting of signs in the appropriate languages of the community should be an expectation, the real language issue here transcends the written word.

When a second water problem came to the author’s attention later that year, he discovered even more “toxic disinterest.” This

time frequent beach closings and toxic waters had become a fact of life for a certain “long urban stretch populated by communities of color.” And, for poor people, “a closed beach, where the water is free, robs them of an important asset.” In an effort to engage community members and devise a plan for spreading awareness about the situation, the author surmised that others involved in environmental education and action would respond to the challenge. Surely such groups would embrace a plan to empower the community to handle its own issues. Perhaps not. One agency asserted they had “no money for a project like this.” Another would “only get involved if there are policy issues at stake.” Over time such encumbering excuses can daunt even the most dedicated individuals, leading them, like this author, to question whether their efforts are a waste of time. They journey from alarm to cynicism when they face the pervasive and far more menacing circumstances described in the next case.

Relationships Needed to Act Locally

After 13 years “working along the United States/Mexico border as a community organizer on environmental and health water issues,” the author of “Act Locally?” understood the money crunch well. With social and environmental problems burgeoning on both sides of the border, her education team was immersed in learning “what it takes, both culturally and educationally” to build local competencies and “to help empower communities

to bring about change.” They had done the hard work of “forming deep relationships” with those they served, and although their funding had always been “hand-to-mouth,” they thrived on their fine reputation and the earned respect of their constituents.

It is not hard to imagine the author’s chagrin when she learned of the newly funded multimillion-dollar environmental monitoring program with “lots of big names behind it” that offered the “golden carrot of technology” to her schools, but little substance. The author was eager to discuss what her group had learned in their years of wrangling with issues of equity, local culture, and the environment. But with the new program “set,” there was little need for this kind of input. What the new program needed was a letter of support because the RFP required minority participation. No bother, just a stamp of approval.

Is it likely that the noninclusive approaches evidenced in the cases “Biophobia?” “Toxic Disinterest?” and “Act Locally?” would actually deliver valid results? They certainly raise fundamental questions. For example, how do outsiders come to know constituents well enough to work with them effectively? And, more importantly, who ultimately makes decisions for the community? Will agencies understand the ways in which cultural settings inevitably interact with program goals and outcomes? How responsive will an intervention be to community values? In what ways will it engage knowledgeable community members in the enterprise?

The author of “Act Locally?” recognized that team effectiveness was associated with a willingness to extend into the community and acquire the level of understanding that can only come from direct, personal involvement. She had to wonder how the recipients of the new grant would go about establishing needed connections since their approach was to dominate – while the community demanded collaboration (see DeVos & Caudill, 1961; Greenfield & Cocking, 1994; Hofstede, 1983 for discussions of ways in which certain societies emphasize self-reliance and individual achievement while others promote group success). And what about the funder? Having recipients meet some kind of “demographic quota” is important in as much as the work needs to reach diverse communities. But shouldn’t the RFP also insist that potential recipients demonstrate successful experience working in multicultural settings as a requirement for award consideration?

For anyone hoping to generate positive outcomes such as capacity building, issues of power need to be consciously addressed. In the case of the Hmong, simply inviting leaders to the table would not eliminate the power differential. Rather, bringing together individuals of different role types and backgrounds and involving them in work that “crosscut[s] the positions of participants” would likely “cultivate openness and sensitivity ... to the expressed and unexpressed concerns of different groups” (Weiss, 1998, p.106). The organization of

those interactions may need to happen in a different manner for distinct groups, but the infusion of community perspectives needs to happen as the ideas are generated, not after the fact to validate a finished product or the imposed input of an outside entity (Dougherty, 1992).

Who Says What Is Culturally Neutral

The author of “Says Who?” would have appreciated having the opportunity to bring this kind of diverse representation to his table. In a stunning discovery, he encountered an ad campaign that used the figure Torquemada from the Spanish Inquisition – “a symbol of religious persecution, intimidation, humiliation, and physical torture” – to champion a state-run anti-litter campaign. Apparently the strategy was based on a “supposedly well-known skit” by the Monty Python troupe satirizing Torquemada’s behavior. Still, given the highly multiethnic make-up of the local population, rather than presuming this to be a source of shared understanding, it was, at best, tasteless. At worst it was an indictment of Hispanic and Catholic communities and showed callous disregard for the “cultural communities that had been Torquemada’s victims.” Despite ongoing criticism, the manager of the program believed that the “lighthearted treatment of the media spots would not be in bad taste” and folks would come to “understand the humorous context.”

Though this assertion is indeed “insensitive,” it more tellingly indicates how far outside the state official’s range of cultural experience and/or knowledge the emotions inspired by this campaign fall. The author and the official are speaking from very different positions – from alternate cultural views – which, given the earlier discussion of belief systems and values, is a far more difficult communicative task than interactions among speakers who have a great deal in common and where much can be taken for granted in the interaction. When assumptions are not shared but instead must be created, more work is needed to achieve understanding. Background information must be provided, assumptions explained, objections anticipated with more use of specific examples and details. It is not surprising when people, like the author, enter into these discussions with the feeling, well founded in experience, that their perspectives are not likely to be taken seriously because the person they need to convince has already determined the appropriate response. Not only do individuals view the possibility of achieving real understanding a futile task – this author questioned whether his work was “more for show than for go” – they begin to second-guess even bringing up the hard issues because complaining may mean “appearing to be too much of an activist.”

A Struggle Over Making Exceptions

The effects of not listening or granting legitimacy to differing perspectives has serious implications not only for the ways groups may contribute or cooperate, but also for our ability to discover more about what strategies work most effectively in these communities. This is the concern addressed by the next author, who wondered whether in her work with a tribal group she was “Making Exceptions or Making Sense?”

From the outset this new member of a groundwater protection project and one of her reservation community partners operated from very different vantage points. On the one hand, the American Indian community understood the importance of working to combat threats to their groundwater and showed great interest in the project. The project wanted to capitalize on this interest and actively sought community involvement to generate a grant proposal. On the other hand, community members were slow to agree, though they repeatedly suggested that the team “talk to the elders.” The author followed through, devoting “countless hours” on the phone, and her boss met with the elders on site, to ensure that the community was on board and that their documentation was complete and prepared on time. Nonetheless, on deadline day, to her surprise, the tribe’s application never arrived. Practically, this posed problems because, for one thing, the tribe would be out of sync with other partner groups. But the situation also led the author

to question whether her team could “claim to be running a fair program if the standards for participation changed for each community.”

Some of the answers can be found in contradictions that surface between the operational norms of the tribe and what the author believes them to be, which she expresses as follows:

- » “The tribe seemed determined to choose the very same top-down decision structure the program was designed to counteract.”
- » The author was “stunned by the contrast between [the tribal team leader’s] nonchalance and my palpable anxiety” about the delay in mailing in the tribe’s application form.
- » “We wrestled with always changing our boundaries to accommodate this partnership.”

The author’s interpretations differ from the indigenous group’s on several levels. Like the Hmong, most indigenous Americans adhere to prescribed leadership structures that defer to the wisdom of elders, who are not only respected for their knowledge and experience, but who also are accountable for the well-being of their communities. “Talking to the elders” is essential because the success of the work will often hinge on elder approval. Historically outsider interventions in Indian country have been largely intrusive and exploitative (Brown, 1971; Crazy Bull, 1997; Dougherty, 1992; Smith, 1999), so there often remains an underlying reluctance

to speak freely to outsiders about issues that affect the tribe. In addition, there are strict rules about what knowledge is private, what can be shared, and who is entitled to speak about any of it. When elders in the community have not been consulted, informants may need to save face by appearing to answer questions through surface compliance, when in reality they can tell only part of the story because certain information cannot or should not be shared. The risk, of course, is that fragmented responses can be accepted as truths. The author's notion of counteracting the elder system of top-down decision-making would surely compromise the reliability and validity of the data.

Second, given that indigenous people favor community interdependence and often consensus, it is not surprising that now, as they exercise their sovereign right to control their own circumstances, they prefer to abide by their own maxims, such as taking the time for each community member's voice to be heard. Patience is highly valued even when this means a conflict with imposed deadlines. Aren't both the author and the tribe, then, wrestling with "boundaries to accommodate this partnership"?

Finally, the author's team came to understand that by bringing in a program designed to work for their usual audience — "the white, middle class of America" — they were also bringing in processes that were not tacitly shared by community members. The program's known methods that yielded

good results in mainstream settings just did not work well on this reservation. As for the project's demands for certain paperwork and documentation, the author summarized it well when she remarked that the project and the tribe came to "the perhaps inevitable dissonance of requiring quantitative results from a community that considers itself inherently qualitative." In the end the project did strike a compromise and although the tribal team looked "different than the other community teams," that was okay.

Avoiding Cultural Paralysis

Those, like the "groundwater" tribe, who are always being asked to adapt, understand well the situatedness and limitations of different perspectives. The author of "Cultural Paralysis?" would have benefited from this kind of prior understanding as he sought ways to alter the tension that enveloped participants attending meetings organized to "address an environmental issue facing their diverse communities." In this case, a seemingly benign icebreaker activity designed for attendees to "get to know each other" triggered a chain of behaviors that ultimately disrupted the remaining sessions.

In response to the leader's request for participants to share something "unique" about themselves, two women, who identified as Native American, disagreed — in competition — it seemed, over who was "more native" or "would speak for the larger [native] community." The author was des-

perate to address the problem directly, but admitted “no understanding of the cultural ‘rules’ that were at play.” The two women made it clear that this conflict was not going to be resolved by the author trying to “make things better.” Nor were the participants who represented other racial and ethnic groups going to venture onto another group’s conflicted turf.

The discord that arose here appears to relate to a number of assumptions taken for granted by each party. Teasing out the possibilities for the native women is of particular interest. First, although indigenous peoples share many common practices and values, they certainly remain distinct cultural and ethnic groups. Autonomy is highly valued and all groups have pride in their particular ways of knowing and being. So it is not surprising that the first speaker was “proud” to share her unique voice and perspective as a Native American. Still, not only to presume to “be the voice for the earth and native peoples,” but also to articulate it publicly, is a clear breach of etiquette for many native groups. It is important to understand that these norms exist, but it also is important to recognize that such cultural expectations emerge in the structural features of discourse.

Though, as mentioned earlier, indigenous peoples’ group focus and sense of interdependence has been well documented, they also value individual opinion. For example, examinations of indigenous elder oratories show that speakers are not expected to convince

or persuade listeners to agree or accept their understanding of a topic. Rather the onus is on listeners to draw conclusions from the talk and take from it what is useful to them (Cooley & Lujan, 1982; Siler & Labadie-Wondergem, 1982). In sum, no speaker has the right to speak for another person. In many instances these stylistic elements extend to contemporary speech. But, in addition, norms surrounding who can actually speak for the group or represent the group perspective revert to local traditions of hierarchy, rank, and status within the community.

On another level, bragging about one’s accomplishments or speaking about the future – essentially predicting one’s success – is often considered bad luck (Bousseau & Toomalatai, 1993; Delpit, 1995; Scollon & Scollon, 1981). If the cultural expectation is that you would never promote yourself, “showing off” knowledge or experience or standing out in a situation is just plain rude. It is likely that the second speaker questioned how native the first could be after breaking so many rules with her opening sentence. At the same time, the author’s well-intentioned effort to “empower” was turned on its head because, as he astutely concluded, the crux of the problem was “being afraid to treat a person of color as I would a white person.” The native women were invited to the meeting “as equal participants,” but somehow everyone else “made them more than equal and gave them control” they hadn’t asked for.

Whose Time, Which Culture

Similarly to the facilitator in *Cultural Paralysis?* perhaps the author of “Whose Time Are We Talking About?” anointed his students with unsolicited power, but in the guise of shared culture. Of indigenous descent, this environmental education specialist embraced the opportunity to design and implement a special program for native students at the national wildlife refuge where he worked. This was a “real opportunity to do something for the earth and Native Americans.” It was a chance to honor culture by helping “young Native Americans develop or strengthen their relationship with the earth, a relationship sacred to their ancestors.”

Still, despite the author’s thorough efforts and planning, one particular behavior of the classes botched even the most meticulous preparation: their propensity to function on “Indian time,” which essentially means “being late.” The author observed that not only the classes, but, in general, Indian communities seemed to operate with little concern for the clock – events of all kinds seemed never to start on time. However, in a context in which classes are scheduled back-to-back and students from other communities tend to arrive on time, starting late can easily throw off the timing of the whole day. The added demands of constantly realigning plans within changing time frames led to great frustration for the author, who was left to conclude that this might be a “way that

Native Americans rebel against highly structured society” or, being less conciliatory, maybe “just an excuse for being too lazy to be on time.”

As a fellow Indian, the author understood the need “to respect the beliefs and traditions of each tribe.” However, as a person socialized in the mainstream, he also understood the benefits of becoming competent in the style of the overculture, which facilitates choice-making and permits use of a common arena to share ideas and to educate others. How could he best bridge these understandings?

First it is important to consider the historical underpinnings of time as an organizer. Smith (1999) reminds us that beginning with colonization, the “belief that ‘natives’ did not value work or have a sense of time provided ideological justification for exclusionary practices which reached across such areas as education, land development, and employment” (p. 54). In fact, notions of “native people being lazy, indolent, [and] with low attention spans, is part of a colonial discourse that continues to this day” (pp. 53–54). And, as in earlier examples, many of these stereotypes are perpetuated through miscommunication.

The literature shows that when people misunderstand one another, they frequently make personal judgments and view the problems in attitudinal terms, often labeling the other person unfriendly, rude, or uncooperative (Feldstein, Alberti, & BenDebba, 1979; Gumperz, 1981). In Indian country,

outsiders have been known to characterize the indigenous style of narration described earlier (one that is more circular than linear and gives responsibility to the listener) as rambling, unsure, or lacking confidence. When viewed in the context of appearing to care little about schedules, planning ahead, and so forth, indigenous speakers can be further perceived as indifferent or irresponsible (Gilliland & Reyhner, 1988).

If, however, we again consider the complex interconnection between language and culture and ways that culture and society shape an individual's thinking, it is telling that many indigenous languages have no word for time. Gilliland and Reyhner (1988) report that in these cases, most communication is in the present tense with some past tense forms and the future discerned from the context. Historically it is likely that "time" did not factor into the core ways of being and thinking in this community. What must be considered is that from then on, even when language shifts occur, the para-linguistic and extra-linguistic features of the heritage language will continue to carry over to contemporary speech [see also McCrum, Cran, & MacNeil's (1986) account of Gullah speech in South Carolina]. So even though the "late" classes and their teachers described here likely speak English as a first language, they would have been socialized to adhere to local ways of knowing and behaving.

Here, as in previous examples, the native classes and those from outside their commu-

nities seem to be operating within different realities. And, as Luria (1976) contends, human thinking differs according to how social groups live out these realities. For the author of "Whose Time Are We Talking About?" time dominated. His reality was organized and scheduled by the clock. For the native classes, time was arbitrary and flexible. From their perspective, rather than focusing on the clock, it was more important to attend to immediate needs at home or elsewhere – to attend to human interaction in the moment (Bousseau & Toomalatai, 1993; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001). One can certainly understand how confounding it can be when interactants operate from such different vantage points.

Though the author struggled to find the best solution, he was not willing to tacitly accept that "Indians are just laid-back and easygoing." He continued to seek answers. A positive next step would be to follow the advice of community members in the earlier case who specified "talk with the elders." So, in addition to approaching the teachers who need to get a handle on the situation, approach those responsible for the children themselves – the grandfather, the uncle, the auntie, the parents. Take advantage of the intricate system of extended family. Tell them what you need – the children on time. Explain why being late is disruptive, why it can be dangerous to hurry. Those responsible will respond when changing behavior contributes to community well-being. After

all, as the author said himself, “I never heard that our ancestors ever practiced being late or that they were lazy.”

Perhaps it will be through such an acquired lens that environmental educators, like all of the case authors, will learn more from indigenous groups and others who, like the Yup'ik, employ the critical skills needed to care for the environment. However, it is vital that all professionals directly confront the kinds of prejudices and biases earmarked in each of the cases. None is as palpable as in the final case, “Welcoming Diversity?”

Welcoming Diversity in Principle Only

In this instance a sponsorship change for the author’s bilingual environmental education program rang a racist chord so jarring that it unearthed open hostility in the workplace. Following the relocation of her program’s parent organization, a local “well-respected environmental group” with recently awarded diversity initiative monies seemed the perfect replacement. Early “conflicting signals” about taking on the program and the lengthy negotiations that ensued were troublesome, but not so unlike the challenges faced by other authors. Even being assigned to an inefficiently small office with no support is not uncommon for ancillary staff. However, as other elements began to creep in – a keen sense that her new sponsor had “little or no interest in [the] program or in serving low-income children” and a notable lack of sensitivity to the students’ economic

circumstances evidenced in queries about “why ‘those groups’ couldn’t pay their fees” – the author became increasingly doubtful.

When her supervisor wanted to “micro-manage” her job, this bilingual Latina professional with advanced degrees and established connections to the community she served was marginalized by behavior no other director encountered. Being asked to submit all of her written work for perusal and co-signature was humiliating. These expectations, combined with the now noticeable “cold” and “indifferent” daily interactions of her coworkers, added up to a working atmosphere of frustration, isolation, and disrespect. What irony, then, on a day when she and her own staff person publicly joked in Spanish about a computer glitch, that the author herself was accused by a monolingual coworker of being disrespectful. “How dare I speak in a language that she did not understand!” Interestingly, the other Spanish speaker was non-Latino, but no ire was directed toward him. Indeed, as the author concluded, the initiative of “this ‘wonderful environmental organization,” supposedly created “to embrace diversity,” obviously “existed only in words, not in action.”

Up to this point, it seems the author chose to put a more positive spin on her situation than the evidence could support. Rationalizing, she had chosen to interpret slights and signals of discord with tolerance. After all, it takes time for new entities to resonate with established ones. However, what now came to the fore was angry, deep-

seated bigotry meshed and entangled with language. When there is little experience and understanding of other cultures and ethnicities, and these cultures and ethnicities are inextricably linked to their languages, one can understand why oral discourse often becomes the spark that elicits personal, negative, and frequently racist judgments [see also Baugh's (2000) discussion of linguistic devaluation and Smitherman's (1978) and Meier's (1998) accounts of misunderstandings about vernacular language use as evidence of cognitive disability].

In truth, the seemingly out of the blue "incident" described by the author aligns with what Steele (1990) terms an "objective correlative – an event that by association evokes a particular emotion or set of emotions" (p. 153). Steele recounts his own reaction after hearing a random person in an airport speak in a Southern accent as follows, "I could condemn this woman, or at least be willing to condemn her and even her region, not because of her racial beliefs, which I didn't know, but because her accent had suddenly made her accountable to my voluminous and vivid memory of a racist South" (1990, p. 150). Like Steele's, the monolingual coworker's reaction was likely an unconscious, visceral response to her own uncertainty, lack of understanding, and probable fear about things she knew little about – diverse people, diverse languages, diverse ways of being. These emotions were building up just as were the author's and,

given the highly unsupportive atmosphere, there were no opportunities or incentives to achieve common ground.

* * * * *

Though the stimulating examples presented in this casebook only graze the surface of complexities faced by environmental educators in diverse settings, they do delineate why these educators must judiciously develop discrete cultural competencies. One requirement is to learn as much as possible about partner communities, but equally important is the need to identify their own values and assumptions along with any predetermined judgments they might have. Because there is so much to learn from community members, it is essential that environmental educators have the skills to connect with them in meaningful ways. Doing so can deepen understanding of and respect for ideas, practices, and perspectives different from their own. Though no one comes to know "everything" about all people and all contexts, everyone needs to develop understandings about individuals, their settings, and issues apt to arise in those settings. Educators can then make better use of strategies that are consistent with those of community members.

All of these abilities lay groundwork for trust, which facilitates the kinds of connections that are needed to accurately share and interpret information and begin to learn about the realities of others. As illustrated in the cases, insiders and outsiders may have differing perspectives, but together they can accomplish mutual understanding.

Dr. Sharon Nelson-Barber, a sociolinguist, directs Culture and Language in Education at WestEd. This cross-program effort explores ways in which teachers more effectively teach the full spectrum of students in today's classrooms. Her work centers in particular on the teaching knowledge and abilities of educators in nontraditional settings and spans indigenous contexts in the lower 48 states, Alaska, and the Northern Pacific Islands of Micronesia. She also teaches at Stanford University's Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity. She combines expertise in qualitative research

and culturally competent assessment and evaluation with years of experience providing equity assistance to schools, organizations, and service agencies serving diverse communities, focusing in particular on cultural issues in the teaching and learning of mathematics and science. Dr. Nelson-Barber has been published extensively, is active in major organizations and meetings in anthropology and education, and serves on a number of national advisory boards and steering committees on teaching and learning in culturally diverse settings.

References

- Baugh, J. (2000). *Beyond ebonics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bousseau, S., & Toomalatai, B. (1993). *Fa'a Samoa: Yesterday and today*. Los Angeles County Office of Education.
- Brown, D. (1971). *Bury my heart at Wounded Knee*. New York: Holt, Rinehardt & Winston, Inc.
- Cooley, R., & Lujan, P. (1982). A structural analysis of speeches by Native American students. In F. Barkin, E. Brandt, & J. Ornstein-Galacia (Eds.), *Bilingualism and language contact* (pp. 80–92). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Crazy Bull, C. (1997). A Native conversation about research and scholarship. *Tribal College Journal*, 9, 17–23.
- Delpit, L. (1995). *Other people's children*. New York: The New Press.
- DeVos, G., & Caudill, W. (1961). Achievement, culture and personality: The case of the Japanese Americans. In Y. Cohen (Ed.), *Social structure and personality* (pp. 391–405). New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston.
- Dougherty, M. (1992). *To steal a kingdom*. Waimanalo, HI: Island Style Press.
- Fadiman, A. (1997). *The spirit catches you and you fall down*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Feldstein, S., Alberti, L., & BenDebba, M. (1979). Self-attributed personality characteristics and the pacing of conversational interaction. In A. Siegman & S. Feldstein (Eds.), *Of speech and time*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Gilliland, H., & Reyhner, J. (1988). *Teaching the Native American*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company.
- Greenfield, P., & Cocking, R. (Eds.). (1994). *Cross-cultural roots of minority child development*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Gumperz, J. (1981). Language, social knowledge and interpersonal relations. In M.W.S. De Silva (Ed.), *York papers in linguistics 9: Aspects of linguistic behaviour: Festschrift R.B. Le Page* (pp. 3–23). York, England: Department of Language and Linguistics, University of York.
- Hofstede, G. (1983). National cultures revisited. *Behavior Science Revisited*, 18, 285–305.
- Luria, A. (1976). *Cognitive development: Its cultural and social foundations*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- McCrum, R., Cran, W., & MacNeil, R. (1986). *The story of English*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Meier, T. (1998). Teaching teachers about Black communications. In T. Perry & L. Delpit (Eds.), *The real Ebonics debate* (pp. 117–125). Boston: Beacon Press.
- Rai, K. (2003, November). Mandela assessment: The model, its cultural relevance and its application to Hmong refugee community-based agencies in Wisconsin. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Evaluation Association, Reno, Nevada.
- Rogoff, B. (2003). *The cultural nature of human development*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Scollon, R., & Scollon, B. (1981). *Narrative, literacy and face in interethnic communication*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation.
- Siler, I., & Labadie-Wondergem, D. (1982). Cultural factors in the organization of speeches by Native Americans. In F. Barkin, E. Brandt, & J. Ornstein-Galacia (Eds.), *Bilingualism and language contact* (pp. 93–100). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Smith, L. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. London: Zed Books, Ltd.
- Smitherman, G. (1978). *Talkin' and testifyin': The language of Black America*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Solano-Flores, W., & Nelson-Barber, S. (2001). On the cultural validity of science assessments. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 38(5), 553–573.
- Steele, S. (1990). *The content of our character*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Trumbull, E., Nelson-Barber, S., & Mitchell, J. (2002). Enhancing mathematics instruction for indigenous American students. In J. Hanks & G. Fast (Eds.), *Changing the faces of mathematics: Perspectives of indigenous people of North America*. Reston, VA: National Council of the Teachers of Mathematics.
- Trumbull, E., Rothstein-Fisch, C., Greenfield, P., & Quiroz, B. (2001). *Bridging cultures between home and school*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Weiss, C. H. (1998). *Evaluation* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Whorf, B. (1956). *Language, thought, and reality*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.