

Teachers and society in general make too many assumptions based on students' names, skin color, language habits, clothing, where they live, and religious preference.

“Tell Something About Yourself . . .”

by Richard G. Hause

In a class of university seniors who are preparing to become professional educators, the professor asks of each student, “Tell something about yourself we would never guess from just looking at you.” The students are uneasy for a time, but as the professor calls each by name, they respond with statements like: “I’m the oldest of the nine children in my family” or “My mother is a stripper (of antique furniture)” or “I’m a rodeo cowboy and my best event is bull riding” or “I’ve just lost 85 pounds!” Some of the students respond with simple statements like “I’m married and have one child, a little boy” or “There’s nothing about me you couldn’t guess from just looking” or “I’m five months pregnant, but I guess you can tell that!”

Why would the professor want to take precious class time to ask each student to respond to questions like these?

It is the contention of the professor that, on the basis of many years of teaching, teachers and society in general make too many assumptions based on students' names, skin color, language habits, clothing, where they live or have lived, and religious preference. Assumptions are made early in the getting-to-know-you period and they stick forever. The professor was helping himself and his students to find out about each other before the stereotypes were formed and open communication became limited.

Assumptions are also based on the vocation of the individual, the schools he or she attended, the amount of wealth the individual has accumulated, the current salary, his or her real estate holdings, travel experiences, friends and associates, what foods he or she eats, the size of the person, the age, and what

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other people say about the individual. Many of these assumptions are made without actually knowing the person or without ever having spoken to him or her. We assume that large people eat a lot and often and that thin people eat very little.

Multicultural education is becoming a larger part of school curricula at elementary, secondary, and collegiate levels; the stereotypes just described cannot be allowed to persist. Teachers, administrators, anyone who works with people and wants to work with them more effectively must look at many factors that make up the life of the individual and his family. Many blacks who come to America from foreign countries are shocked when they are refused service or courtesy by people whose views are crippled by stereotypes about skin color. By the same token, those who are thought to be in the majority for some reason or lack of same are often misunderstood. There is a need for more and effective ways to help people fill in the gaps in information that would help them to work more completely with all individuals.

There is a professor who is respected in his field. His students and cohorts feel he is in that position on the basis of having grown up in a university-educated family. They also assume he would not know much about poor people and their struggles. They do not know that this professor was born in the depths of the Depression, was the third child in a family that eked out an existence on a 40-acre rented dairy farm. The father had an eighth grade education while the mother was forced to quit school in the seventh grade. The now professor had worked on the small farm until he was twelve and the father explained that if the children were going to get through high school, they were going to have to find jobs away from the farm. A gasoline station a mile away from the farm provided employment after school and on Saturdays and a produce dock helped the youngster to find summer employment, often from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. six days a week. His older brother was doing much the same thing; they both wanted to finish high school and go on to college. They both worked at various jobs to get through college with little assistance from home. Both of these men achieved their goals—one is the professor; the other is a president of a small college. To look at them today, one would think they had had a pretty easy life. Two brothers from the family graduated from high school and led successful careers in blue collar jobs; an only sister attended one semester of college and now conducts a program to feed the elderly.

There is a well-known artist who makes his living by running a road grader during the day. He loves to paint and the grading job allows him the money to do his thing. Many of his admirers would be stunned to know what his vocation really is. An emergency room nurse doesn't tell that she grew up in a poor rural family in Colorado. There were eight or nine children and three of those children were severely mentally retarded. The mother was retarded and could not care

for the children and keep the house. The father was an eccentric about whom all manner of stories were told—he kept money hidden in the barn; he had graduated from a fine Eastern university and had learned too much for his own good. When a county nurse came to call on the family and offer food and medical aid to the starving youngsters and their parents, the father ran her off his place with a shotgun! Yet, the oldest daughter quietly got away from her home, worked as a housekeeper in homes in town, finished her public schooling, and move to a large city where she scrubbed the hospital wards to save enough money to enter nursing school. She returned to her home in later years to make arrangements for the care of her retarded brothers and sister. Most of her colleagues would be thrilled to know her story.

An elementary principal who is highly respected by his staff, students, and parents revealed one day that his aged father could not read or write. Here was a man who has helped hundreds of children to learn to read and write and his own father could not!

Awareness of those around us is necessary if we are to communicate and if we are to appreciate them for what and who they are rather than what race they are, what gender they are, how old they are, how able or unable they are, or how much money they have, where they live, where they buy their clothes, what foods they eat, or any other of a variety of rules of thumb that are used to make judgments about people. And it goes both ways—we must learn as much about the supposed majority as we learn about the minority groups in society.

There are many methods teachers at all levels can use to learn more about students and be able to plan for them individually. "Tell something about yourself . . ." is only one of these methods. The British writer William Plomer points out in his preface to a recording of Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*: "It is a function of creative persons to perceive the relations between thoughts, or things, or forms of expression that may seem utterly different, and to be able to combine them into some new form." Plomer was, of course, reflecting on the genius of Benjamin Britten and his creative ways of making connections between a war, a people, and music.

Teachers have this same ability to make connections in varying degrees depending on their humanness and humaneness. Teachers make the connections between the material to be taught and the learner. But, teachers can also help students to make connections among people, especially the persons in their classes. For instance, during the "Tell something . . ." activity, it is not uncommon for two people to discover that they are from the same part of the country, that they have known each other before, that they share interests or hobbies, that they have similar wishes for the future, or that they are distantly related. These connections could never have been made without the activity planned and executed by the professor. Making connections such as these may help the

shy student to feel a part of the group; it may also help the teacher and the class to dismiss from their minds some assumptions that were made when the class met for the first time. Many university classes have students from foreign countries in them. Many of the class members from America assume that foreign students have little facility with English so they just don't take the time to talk with them. Other members assume that because they are foreign, these students prefer not to engage in conversation. Some students even shout at them as though they were deaf or even slow to learn!

On another plane, many university classes for elementary teachers have very few male students. It is often assumed that a "real man" would never teach small children; therefore, there must be something wrong with the men who go into elementary education, or they are there to teach just long enough to move into administration. Society also feels that men who enter the arts at any level are slightly less than men. By the same token, women who pursue a career in police arts or some vocation thought to be strictly for men are suspect! In each of these cases, teachers would do well to get acquainted with the individuals and determine why they have entered their professions and then help them to attain their goals.

Sometimes an informal conversation between classes can help the teacher learn more about students and their backgrounds, but games in the class can often yield more helpful information. A simple question and answer form can help the students locate those in the room who share their birthday; who have the same number of siblings, who moved from another state, who has a rural background (can milk a cow, or drive a tractor), who can speak a foreign language (learned at home or at school), who plays musical instruments, or who has been in the hospital in the past year (perhaps just to visit a patient!). The students have fun locating these individuals and the follow-up gives the teacher the opportunity to make further connections between and among the students.

It is always amazing to discover students who have achieved success in a rare way or students who do odd things in their spare time. One student in a recent graduate class told all about her hobby of building and furnishing doll houses with authentic reproductions of period pieces. One of her houses recently sold for over \$6,000! She related that some of the doll houses at recent shows have sold for over \$60,000! When asked how she became involved in that hobby, she said that she had always wanted a doll house as a child and she happened into a shop that specialized in miniatures and she got hooked. Many of the graduate students were amazed that a grown woman would spend her spare time playing with doll houses. She was quick to point out that a great deal of skill is involved in making miniatures, in some cases more skill than it takes to make a full-sized piece. At least a few of the students went away from the class with an inter-

est in miniatures or at least a new appreciation for the effort involved in making one.

Ask the students to bring something from home that expresses "The Real You" and see what one finds out about them and their backgrounds and upbringing. Most of the students will bring an old pair of jeans or running shoes; some will bring a stuffed animal with which they readily relate; some will bring objects they have made as a part of their avocations; some will sing a tune or play an instrument; some will bring pictures to show where they have been in the world; one lady recently brought a huge trash bag full of all the unfinished projects she had begun at some point in her life. The rest of the class howled in complete understanding! Each of these objects brought to class by the students helps the teacher and the students to gain further insight into the makeup of each person in the class. Again, many connections are made as people talk to people about the things they brought to show their real selves to others. Some of the students will be very open with this experience and will share openly; others will be shy and bring something that is not personal or intimate. This also tells something about those persons.

Another activity that gives background information and makes a class fun and exciting is to ask each student to bring to class something that he or she is sure no one in the class can identify. The original intent of this activity is to build curiosity into the curriculum. But, the teacher and students can also discover backgrounds of people from the things they bring to share. One individual recently brought a very old decorative metal pin that no one could identify. He later related that the pin had been used by his great grandmother to hold up her long skirts when she rode to town in the horse-drawn buggy. She had lived in rural Nebraska. He went on to tell the class that his grandfather had been born in a sod house in Nebraska. His parents are well-to-do bankers in Shawnee Mission, Kansas, and it was hard for the class to believe his rural, rather poor heritage. Another student brought in some tools used to repair a sauna in Norway. She revealed that she had worked and saved enough money

to go to Norway and spend a year with a Norwegian family she had gotten to know through a pen pal club in high school. This girl had never spoken much in class and the class was surprised to hear of her ingenuity in getting to a foreign country. (She was rather pleased to reveal this about herself, too.) One boy brought a pick for cleaning horses' hooves and when asked why he had it, he told about his travels over the United States for three years as a professional rodeo cowboy. He now works for a stock producer out of Oklahoma during the summer. He was dressed in slacks and an oxford cloth shirt and was wearing docksiders—a far cry from the jeans, spurs, chaps, and big hat he had worn as a cowboy. Even his speaking manner did not give him away! When asked if he had grown up on a ranch, he said he had not. He grew up in New York and became interested in rodeo when he went to a small junior college in the Midwest. His roommate was a rodeo cowboy and asked him to try out some of the tricks of the trade. Success in bull riding earned him a place as a member of the Professional Rodeo Cowboys' Association.

Assumptions about people are made on the basis of sex, age, ethnic backgrounds, race, apparent handicaps, and position in society. Each of these can be dispelled with actual situations learned by persons who were willing to take the time and make the effort to become more keenly aware of people and their backgrounds. Don't assume that someone who is seemingly in the majority has always been in the majority. Perhaps the climb to that position has not been an easy one and perhaps that person has learned some humility along the way that helps him or her to relate to those less fortunate.

Before lasting assumptions are made, be willing to ask: "Tell me something about yourself. I'd never guess from just looking at you." G. H. Beattie, a teacher and administrator from a small rural community in Colorado, wrote in a letter to a former pupil: "Many facets go into the development of the whole individual. Each plays a very definite part in the process. High priority must be given to the enthusiasm and determination of the individual."