Cultural Awareness through Cooking

Chris wrote a proposal for a student achievement grant from the National Education Association for my final project in EDU 635 - Seminar in Second Language Literacy. He implemented the grant in the spring of 2012 with 50 students enrolled in a sociology class at Scarborough High School.

Project Summary

Through inquiry, exposure to multicultural experiences, and self-reflection this project aimed to foster cultural competence, interest, and awareness among students taking sociology. Using food as an entryway for broader discussions, students interacted directly with cultural practices different from their own.

In groups of five, students worked with immigrants from Eritrea, Somalia, Thailand, South Korea, Japan, El Salvador, or India at their restaurants in Portland. Students learned about traditional ingredients and methods of food preparation, as well as how food is served and consumed in the hosts’ culture. As they ate the meals they prepared, students asked the hosts questions about their culture and the immigration process and shared insights into American cultural practices.

Students documented their experiences in writing and on film, focusing on their reactions to non-familiar behaviors and values. Through reflection, survey completion, and discussion, students considered their own race, culture, ethnicity, and respect for diversity.

Goals

This project serves to reduce students’ sense of ethnocentrism, the belief that their own culture is best and that other societies and cultures should be ranked according to how closely they resemble their own. The ultimate goal is for students to be able to understand other cultures or behaviors on their own terms, and to not judge them as better or worse than their own way of doing things.

This project also serves to familiarize students with the changing cultural landscape of the state of Maine by exposing students to the increasing diversity of Portland.

Presentations

In order to maximize the impact of this project, students presented their 20-30 minute documentaries about the project to other classes at Scarborough High School. They led a general discussion about ethnocentrism and answered questions about their experiences.