Cultural Interview

SAMPLE

EDU 6200

Aurora University

I interviewed Sandra XXXXXX, an Aurora University classmate and friend, to learn about her perceptions of the cultural differences between the Mexican and American cultures, and her thoughts on how to bridge those differences. Sandra and I became friends on the very first day of our cohort last January. She came to the United States from Mexico at the age of nine, and did not speak any English at the time. We had often talked about her experiences in school and her efforts to learn the new culture, as well as the things that still seem odd to her in her adopted country, so she seemed a logical choice for the assignment. Although she had to drop out of our cohort a few months ago because of the need to complete other coursework for a required certification for her job, and also because she is expecting her second child, we have kept in touch via Facebook. Because she is caring for her 3-year-old son and taking classes this summer, we agreed to keep it simple and do the interview over the phone.

**What are the greatest cultural differences between your culture and mine?**

Sandra’s immediate response to this question was, “The food!” She said that she did not like any of the American foods she was offered, so much so that her mom would prepare a hot Mexican lunch and deliver it to school every day for her and her siblings just so she would eat. She despised ketchup, having grown up on hot sauce, and reported that what Americans considered tacos were not even remotely like what she was accustomed to. I asked whether the other kids teased her about her special lunches or if they were curious, and she said they were interested in it and wanted to try her food. So her mother checked with her teacher to make sure it would be okay, and then began preparing extra food so Sandra could share with her friends and introduce them to a little piece of her culture.

She also mentioned that the ways kids are raised here are quite different. For example, in our country, girls are allowed to have boyfriends, but are expected to bring them home so their parents can meet them and approve of them. In Mexico she said it would be considered extremely disrespectful for a girl to bring a young man home to meet her parents, and girls are not supposed to ask a boy to go to a party with them or be seen out in public with them. Boys are allowed to bring home their girlfriends, but the same is not true for daughters. Because of this, Sandra, who got married to a fine young Mexican-American man at the age of 25, was afraid to tell her father that she was getting married until three months before the ceremony, and then he was so angry that he did not speak to her for the next two months. He had told her that they would maybe discuss her getting dating and getting married when she reached the age of 30, but like many Mexican parents, he seemed really to have preferred that his daughters stay at home with their parents indefinitely. I asked how her parents ever managed to fall in love and marry with a system like this, and she said they would sometimes walk home after church and talk; but one day her grandfather caught them and chased her dad down the street and almost beat him up. She observed that it is starting to change somewhat in their culture, that some of her cousins have boldly brought boyfriends to family weddings, and her aunts are okay with this because they don’t believe their daughters should have to be secretive about their dating lives. But the uncles and grandparents still strongly disapprove of this. There is a strong double-standard in place.

**How do persons in my culture tend to misunderstand you because of cultural differences?**

Sandra said that celebrations are very important in her culture. It is considered important to mark life transitions of any kind with ceremonies and large, festive parties. This includes first communions, quinceaneros (a special coming-of-age party for girls when they turn 15), graduations, and many smaller life events as well. All events are cause for celebration and a reason for the gathering of friends and family for food, music, dancing, and socializing.

Unfortunately, misunderstanding about this cultural value led to a small war at the bi-lingual preschool where she teaches. The bilingual teachers make the graduation to kindergarten a big event for the preschoolers and their proud families. Parents are formally invited, the gym is decorated to the hilt, everyone dresses up very nicely, and a ceremony is held at which the preschoolers receive a certificate of promotion. The non-bilingual teachers in the building thought this was way over-the-top, so to speak, and complained that it should be eliminated or at least scaled way back. They said that people just throw away the certificates anyway and that it was a waste of money. But Sandra said that is not true, that on her home visits she has seen the diplomas framed and proudly hung on the wall, and that is typical of the value Mexican families place on their children’s accomplishments. The successes of even the youngest, especially as they relate to education, are recognized and celebrated in Mexican culture. It took two full faculty meetings to try to work this out between the teachers and to come to compromise, but she said that although the graduation ceremony will continue, now some of the non-bilingual teachers don’t speak to them anymore.

**What cultural misunderstanding between our cultures causes you the most frustration? Why?**

The way many people refer to anyone who is not white or black as being Mexican is a frustration Sandra and her husband often discuss. People who are Asian, Filipino, Arabic, and mixed races of all kinds get swept up in the general terms people apply to anyone who is not Caucasian. Many Hispanic-looking people come from Central America, South America, the Caribbean Islands, and other places, yet people will refer to them all as Mexican. Also, Mexicans are not all Hispanic, since there are people of European, Asian and other extractions who are residents of Mexico. This tendency of others to have a set concept of what it is to look Mexican ties in to other unflattering stereotypes people carry of what it is to act or to be Mexican as well.

**If you could say anything to the teachers of my culture, what would it be?**

Don’t make assumptions. Sandra’s brother is extremely intelligent, and had been in enriched and honors classes ever since kindergarten, all the way through school. Yet one day he walked into an honors math class on the first day of high school, glanced around and noticed that he was the only Mexican in a class of Caucasian and Asian students, and was told immediately by the teacher that he must be in the wrong room and should check his schedule. He suggested she should check her class roster instead. Many teachers also automatically assumed he was a troublemaker or a gang member, when in reality he was a bright, conscientious and hardworking young man who went on to college to earn a double major in business and accounting, and now works for an international banking firm. At present he is handling several hundred loans for big companies like Chrysler. He will be starting his master’s degree in business administration in the fall.

**How could teachers of my culture be more culturally sensitive to you and your culture?**

Get to know more about the culture, and the cultures of all students represented in your classroom. Take the time to find these things out, especially body language, which can be so different from one culture to the next and cause serious misunderstandings. As children Sandra and her siblings had learned not to look directly at authority figures because that was considered a sign of disrespect, but when they came to school in this country it was interpreted in quite the opposite way.

Sandra also suggested seeking out parents one on one to ask for more information about their cultures, if possible. Have a good list of questions developed for this purpose, but understand that not all parents will feel comfortable talking to the teacher in this way. Invite them to come into the classroom and share something important about their culture with the students. With younger grades, ask them to read a story to the students that they read at home that relates to or is from their culture.

In reflecting on my interview with Sandra, I appreciated the opportunity to spend time really getting into someone else’s shoes to understand her personal interpretation of the immigrant experience. There are so many adjustments to be made, and something as basic as the food that is available in the school lunchroom can be huge. As teachers we may be looking at language barriers and academic challenges, but the whole child needs to be considered. I realize that I need to be aware of and sensitive to some of those basic concerns kids may have, as well as to their success at learning the subject matter.

I also remember Sandra telling me in the past about getting off the school bus her first day at her American school, and one of the teachers was telling all the students which door to go to for her class, but she couldn’t understand and did not know where to go. The woman just kept speaking to her in English in a tone that implied she wasn’t smart enough to understand. She burst into tears, but fortunately a teacher who spoke Spanish saw and came to help her. This has inspired me to brush up on my Spanish and not be afraid to use it, since even a modest amount of communication in one’s own language can be comforting and welcoming.