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### NECIT: WHAT I LEARNED THIS SEMESTER

Throughout my childhood and into my adulthood years I often had a difficult time saying my name. It was particularly difficult if I were in a group and trying to introduce myself. It wasn't until I was on stage in front of 5,000 women, introducing myself as a member of an up and coming team with Mary Kay Cosmetics, that I realized I needed to take the focus off myself and put it on my team. It took three tries to stutter out my name into a microphone that boomed every falter of my voice out to the auditorium. When I finally completed the utterance and started talking about my team, things were much easier. I imagine that is one of the difficulties we have as teachers, that is, how to avoid *I to you or reductive teaching paradigm* and make a shift to *you~me~we, or conversational/inclusive teaching paradigm*. I also think that for our students, getting the focus off the **feeling** of being a diversely singular "I" and onto the **knowing** of being an inclusive part of a team and community can be a difficult paradigm shift. What I have begun to learn from this past semester are ways of building bridges from one pattern of thinking to a newer, more inclusive pattern. Bridging communities of students, teachers, administrators, and community is a complicated, evolving process of which there is no one answer except to keep the process moving. During the first few weeks of meetings our NECIT group tried to define diversity and inclusiveness; it was a struggle. I tried by comparing myself with others in the group and pitting my *minorityness* against their *minorityness*. I decided that that was not "it" because diversity is not necessarily being a minority—nor is it that we recognize our diversity as being different from others, in fact, diversity might even be considered the majority if we recognize our differences as what brings us together. So I learned that I needed to relax, enjoy the company of our group, learn what I could about *us* as the first Massasoit Community College NECIT, how and what makes us tick, and how *we* could begin building bridges of diversity and inclusion through what we eventually termed, MCCNECIT.

One thought asked by Pepp was: *What external messages about themselves as learners have our [individual, diverse] students received (and how would we know this?)* My response to this question is where the analogy between our group and our students began; I bridged "us" with our students or the "other". Our NECIT group is a rich example of our students, and we can understand the external messages that our students are experiencing by taking a hard look at ourselves, both in and out of our group; both in and out of our comfort zones, wherever and whatever they are. Whatever experiences we have had and conversed about in our own environment is certainly analogous to that that the "other" has gone through. Simply "listening" or looking back to our first conversations as we got to know each other, we can see that we are diverse and have had as many external messages about ourselves as students have about themselves. We can look at our time during our NECIT seminar, as if we took on the role as student and verbalized our experiences of our own external messages. Next, we took the role of a teacher aware of the importance of diversity and inclusiveness, as we "heard" whatever (we) the student expressed—often the external messages were of dismissive, negative, and invalidating perspectives. The next important step is what the student and/or teacher may do with these

messages? A place of trust and openness is created when students are validated for their experiences, asked to accept responsibility for their learning, and asked to collaborate in the building of a classroom environment and curriculum. As viewers of this happening experience we often see the shift of focus as students go through their own paradigm shift, as they become part of an inclusive team by voicing their values and ideas and experiences. The point, then, is that it is important to recognize our own sense of diversity and need for inclusiveness in the classroom because as teacher, we are leading the classroom community. Recognizing our own humility, fallibility, vulnerability, and outright humaneness in the classroom is recognizing our “otherness” that informs our thinking, and helps the student recognize their own “otherness” and relax.

To discover what external messages students have about themselves and to help get communication rolling we can ask them. I begin discovery of where each student is “coming from” when ask students to write about their own feelings regarding reading and writing. What have their experiences been, who influenced them one way or another? As teachers we can discover some of the external messages students have about themselves by reading these initial essays. Perhaps we can discover certain “touchstones” that can be elaborated on throughout the semester. I have three (and now four) such touchstones of positive writing experience, two that I will share today. I think, if not for these I may not be the person/teacher I am today. They were relatively small experiences, but deeply felt so that they stayed with me. Miss Price, back in fourth grade, assigned us to write in a journal about our daily experiences. I must have picked up some tidbit of information about birds somewhere and wrote about a robin hopping along the ground, tilting its head and feeling the vibrations of worms beneath. Miss Price wrote, in red ink, that she had learned something new about birds. She didn’t know that they did that. To think I had information that a teacher didn’t know empowered me for a moment that lasted to this day! Another experience was Mr. Haus, my sixth grade teacher who sang Italian songs from behind a black podium and called Kenny Mizrahi, facetious (a pretty big mysterious word for me in 6<sup>th</sup> grade). My friend, Janice, and I made up a song about Mr. Haus and, in fact, complained to the principal about this man’s unusual ways of teaching and the high expectations he had of us. At the time, I thought I didn’t like Mr. Haus; needless to say, as I got older, he became a role model for my teaching. Perhaps the lesson is, don’t feel embarrassed in front of the class, do what you need to do to keep them interested, excited, questioning, learning. Ultimately, the more I understand my own touchstones, the more I am able to be comfortable and to focus with my students on what there is to be learned.

How might similar externals affect student attitudes, expectations, and performance? What I have gathered from many of the readings is that the concept of diversity means that in a classroom there are students from many different cultures, and backgrounds, working with external messages that inform, prevent, and interfere with learning: yet, just as we struggled to define diversity and inclusion, we can’t possibly get through the quagmire of what is presented to us through those students and “include” everyone. So, how do we deal with that? We can, as the paradigm of NECIT did, allow the individuals, with all their own and sometimes private diversity, to create a new diverse group of their own. Within that group there is a sense of inclusion and safety because they created the group. No one is excluded because they are an intricate part of the group. It isn’t about forcing the ones into what the teacher is defining as “the class” or about how the individual will fit into which clique in the classroom. The group helps to

define who they are and in so doing, create their own set of questions and sense of learning outcomes. The classroom environment becomes one which they created and are willing to participate in making work. Working to create this type of classroom creates that “friction” area for learning or what Louise Pratt refers to as the *Contact Zone* where there is rich learning out of chaos. In the NECIT analogy we initially met as singular people from many different cultures, and backgrounds, working with external messages that inform, prevent, and interfere with learning; we still are; only now we have created our own trusting group and have a greater understanding of each other, our students, our institution, and our community. We want to continue the learning acquisition of our group and have developed a passion to not only continue looking at diversity and inclusion in our classrooms, but to include more faculty, staff, administration, and community. What more could we ask from our students than they find a passion in learning and take it out into the world with them?

How can a teacher implement the NECIT analogy in his/her classroom? With all that a good teacher does do, maybe to ask them to dynamically change their style is asking too much. Instead, what is needed is a syllabus designed to put the onus of change on the class participants (which includes the teacher) as they work through the semester. Things may get messy but, as Bain claims, “I can do that as long as it does no real harm to our students”. In a community college, students often come from places that don’t offer trust in a way they can work with it and incorporate it into their self esteem, their sense of empowerment to learn, and self-confidence. The good teachers put the chalk into the hands of their students. They trust the students. They Socratically ask them questions allowing the student to build their own framework of education. Implicit in the group coming together and creating a classroom syllabus is the sense that ideas are heard and in turn, a sense of trust is initiated and built upon throughout the semester which ideally, just as their education does, carries throughout their lives.

Two semesters ago, using the syllabus I had designed to be diverse and inclusive, I had an uncomfortable experience and difficult time speaking about “black fathering” and of being called a “nigger” because I felt that I didn’t (and still don’t) “know” about that. I was uncomfortable and my students knew I was uncomfortable and told me to “let it go”. Rather than implementing a place of trust, inclusion, and diversity, and because the African American student was forced to take the role of authority, I had excluded the class from the discussion and created a sense of discomfort. If, from the beginning, students had taken part in determining which essays to read and how they wanted to participate in class, it may have been a different discussion. Similarly to the journal piece in Miss Price’s class, when I “trust” and I speak from what I know of me, my world, my environment, my thoughts, ideas, then I am inclusive without trying and students can join in that discussion. There is honesty in trusting ourselves, what we know, and where we are from that lays a foundation for inclusion. We are who we are, each in trust—so we are diversity.

We at MCCNECIT are diversity in action. Accepting diversity doesn’t mean that we are a big happy family and “love” each other at the end of the day as we hug and kiss goodbye. Diversity is exactly what we are doing in our MCCNECIT group. We are allowing each other to be heard saying our own name, at whatever level he/she wants to be heard. We use our hearts and minds to help students develop more and more trust so perhaps they can be more comfortable. And the best way to bring this to our students is to continue this sort of honesty, trusting, and communal conversation—opening up our classes so they can build their own sense of trust. The real

problem, is when I do this in my class, and they go to the next class, where that professor happens to be of the kind that Bain *didn't choose* in his book, what then? All the more reason to bring NECIT to our faculty, administrators, and community, where they are. To begin the list of how to continue both as a group and personally:

1. Like Pepp, get to know my students better, and keep learning about them throughout the semester.
2. Encourage students to participate in developing the syllabus.
3. Bring MCCNECIT to as many conferences as we can.
4. Implement luncheon discussions.
5. Get as many faculty and administrators involved as possible.
5. Create a MCCNECIT blog