

Tips for Entering the Community

An Excerpt from Doing Multicultural Education for Achievement and Equity by Carl Grant and Christine Sleeter

“To act ethically is to act the way one acts toward people whom one respects.” Ethical behavior is about the attitude that teachers bring into the community and bring to their interpretations. Acting on your ethical behavior, you would do the following:

PREPARATION FOR ENTRY

1. Be clear about what you want from your visit. Who is your population of interest? Who do you want/need to talk with?
2. Identify and contact gatekeepers or key respondents (people who have special knowledge or individuals who can facilitate contact). If the school has a community worker, ask that person to make the first few visits with you. If no community worker is available, an upper-grade student is an excellent companion.
3. Acquire background knowledge about the community, including how to act in culturally appropriate ways.
4. Prepare questions or observation plans, and decide how you are going to take notes.
5. Plan exactly when, where, and at what time you will meet with key respondents.
6. Explain the reasons you wish to visit the community. You may briefly explain the curriculum for the year, including any field trips, assemblies, guest speakers, and so forth. Teachers are not known for visiting their school community, so if parents are suspicious at first, that is OK. Tell them why you are there. Carl would visit the homes of all of his students within the first two weeks of the semester. During this time he would get parents to sign off on any permission slips for field trips, etc. When he first started teaching at the school, he would take one or two students with him who knew the area and the community residents.

ENTRY

7. Develop rapport with gatekeepers, key residents, and community population, and be polite. Politeness may differ from community to community. Ask the traveling companions for help in this area. For example, you may ask: “Is there anything I need to know to show politeness and sincerity during the visit to this home or community site?”
8. Be aware of where you place your personal items (e.g. hat, coat, etc.). Trust your feelings; if you don’t feel comfortable, leave.
9. Reciprocity, or both parties getting something out the relationship, is highly important, particularly in communities that universities have used but have not collaborated with. Offer your assistance or invite suggestions about what you can do to assist the community. Write a thank you letter after the visit.

WHILE YOU ARE THERE

10. Explain why you are taking notes and collecting materials. Take notes openly. By this we mean, don't hide what you are writing. Instead, share it and tell folks why you are writing things down. Carl told his host that he had to write because he was lousy at remembering names, and did not want to mix up the information collected between the first and fifth home visits. The host would show understanding and some hosts would contribute stories about their own memory. Such swapping of little tales also serves as an ice-breaker.
11. Be nonjudgmental. Remember that your observation is only a thin slice of the ongoing activities. Any judgment you make needs to take that into consideration.
12. If possible, ask questions that will help to clarify any concerns or questions you may have about what you are seeing or hearing.
13. Be patient. Don't hop about from one location to the next.

WHEN YOU ARE FINISHED

14. Conclude your visit with invitations to come and visit at school. Explain the procedure for entering the building and stopping by the office to get a guest pass. Also, tell them that you will let the office secretary know that you will be expecting guests throughout the semester. This will take the sting out of the formal but necessary procedure for entering the school and visiting your class.