

State Your Point of View

Opinions on Multiculturalism in the United States

This activity allows you to see where the participants are philosophically. I like to vary the statements according to the topic and the group.

1. Set up a continuum by using squares of paper spread out in a line on the floor. They should be marked as follows:

Agree Somewhat Agree Somewhat Disagree Disagree

2. Ask participants to stand on the continuum in response to statements you read. I pick one or two to read. If your inservice program is several sessions long, you may want to do a few at each session. Read statements such as:

- 1. I think the United States should adopt English as the official language so that English would be the only language used by Federal and state agencies.**
- 2. It should take our second language learners about 1 year to learn a language.**
- 3. My (great) grandparents came to this country and no one helped them learn English. This is what today's immigrants should be doing.**
- 4. When you become fluent in a foreign language this leads to "thinking like a native."**
- 5. Culture is a broad concept that embraces all aspects of human life. It is everything that humans have learned.**
- 6. A smile means the same thing in every language.**
- 7. Deep down everyone in the world is just the same.**
- 8. "We will be able to achieve a just and prosperous society only when our schools ensure that everyone commands enough shared background knowledge to be able to communicate effectively with everyone else." (from Hirsh's *Cultural Literacy*)**

3. Have participants get into groups based on where they are along the continuum and defend their point of view. Encourage participants to change their place at any time. Do not impose your point of view on the participants but use this activity to see where you may need to present more information.

Here are some personal thoughts on each of the statements mentioned above:

1. I think the United States should adopt English as the official language so that English would be the only language used by Federal and state agencies.

Participants need to be aware that this law would affect getting a driver's license, medical care, registering children in school, census taking to name a few. The results of such a law would be far-reaching.

2. It should take our second language learners about 1 year to learn a language.

We all know the research on this one. It may take some second language learners a year to learn the social English that they need in order to function in school, work, etc. But it takes much longer to learn the language needed for academic purposes. Conservative estimates are that it takes students three to seven years to learn English for academic purposes.

3. My (great) grandparents came to this country and no one helped them learn English. This is what today's immigrants should be doing.

Our grandparents and great-grandparents came to this country when you didn't need a lot of education to succeed. Many of those same grandparents never went beyond the 8th grade. Today's world is much more complex and more education is needed in order to succeed .

4. When you become fluent in a foreign language this leads to "thinking like a native."

This statement ignores the role that culture plays in language. It is quite common for a person to learn the mechanics of a language and speak it quite well without really understanding the culture.

5. A smile means the same thing in every language.

Although this saying is featured on signs that you see hanging in many schools, I don't find this to be true. In some cultures people don't smile very much at all. A smile is reserved for greeting close friends. American smile and say hello to everyone. It would be construed as "phony." People sometimes smile if they are embarrassed. A smile doesn't necessarily mean the same thing in every language.

6. Deep down everyone in the world is just the same.

This statement betrays the American self perception of individualism and egalitarianism. It ignores the all pervasive role that culture plays in human live.

7. "We will be able to achieve a just and prosperous society only when our schools ensure that everyone commands enough shared background knowledge to be able to communicate effectively with everyone else." (from Hirsh's *Cultural Literacy*).

Just one thought: Whose background? Whose shared knowledge? Generally this means white, European knowledge and background. It ignores the heritages of other ethnic groups in the United States.

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