

## **Intercultural Skills Workshop held on 6<sup>th</sup> June 2012**

### **Participants:**

- 1 cultural expert
- 6 Vocational Trainers
- 3 ESOL tutors
- 8 past and present students

### **1. Opening Session**

The objectives of the workshop were outlined:

- To consider the issues faced by trainees from different cultures
- To understand how teachers/trainers approach those issues and why we don't always get it right
- To identify the key skills needed for working with migrants
- To identify the key elements to be included in a training package
- To consider the best way to deliver training to teachers/trainers

The workshop opened with a session on 'where did you come from and how did you end up here':

- When you think about your roots, what place(s) of origin do you identify for your family?
- Have you ever heard any stories about how your family or your ancestors came to the place where you grew up?
- in pairs, briefly tell each other your story and report back a summary

Participants swapped stories of family history and circumstances that led to us all being in Newham at this time. There were positive stories of migration and some people were just temporary residents. Participants shared stories of how they were received in the UK and some of the problems they faced.

In total there were 20 world languages spoken among the workshop participants: English, Urdu, Arabic, Italian, Hindi, French, Spanish, Moroccan dialect, two Nigerian dialects, Farooq, Tamil Gujarati, Bengali (many dialects), Greek, Punjabi, Japanese, German, Mandarin, Turkish and Russian.

### **2. Key Skills for Working with People from Different Countries or Diverse Cultures**

Our cultural expert gave a presentation. She defined culture: "Culture is not just something that someone else has. All of us have a total ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious or non-religious heritage that influences our current beliefs, values and behaviours". She used the 'iceberg metaphor' showing that our visible culture (dress, traditions, behaviours, etc.) was a very small part of our cultural heritage – the rest was mostly hidden (e.g. assumptions, values, perceptions, attitudes). Using the 'tinted lenses metaphor' she explained how all of us see the same picture in a slightly different way. She

talked about how we do not think to question or explain the hidden aspects of our culture and this results in groups of people arriving at a set of generally unspoken and unwritten rules for working and living together. We learn the 'rules' of culture as part of growing up in our societies. Cultural behaviour becomes so natural and automatic that we tend to think that other cultures have rituals and customs and we do not. We only become conscious of our hidden and unspoken rules when we are in contact with another group whose rules are different.

We then discussed the National Occupational Standards for Intercultural Working. These standards have been produced for the UK by CiLT (National Centre for Languages) and were approved by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills in 2008. Unit 1 of the standards (Develop your skills to work effectively with people from different countries or diverse cultures) was discussed in detail, looking at examples of things like the different meaning of hand gestures in different countries. Firstly in pairs, and then the whole group considered constructive ways to avoid problems like these.

### **3. Intercultural Communication or Miscommunication and Misunderstanding?**

This session started with viewing a DVD from the Department of Work and Pensions including sections on 'Ways of Talking' and 'Knowing the Rules of the Game'. The DVD was based on research by Kings, University of London.

It showed some candidates being interviewed for jobs and talked about decisions being made on the basis of interview communication skills rather than suitability for the job. For example, when candidates were asked to describe their suitability for a particular task, the white British candidate talked about exactly how he would do the task and how he coped with the boring nature of the job and he gave examples from his current job. This is known as the 'standard Western narrative'. It is highly rated in job interviews. When asked to describe how he would carry out a task, the Indian candidate instead talked about his qualifications. Qualifications are highly valued in Indian society and this is the response he would expect to give in India. However, it did not impress the British interviewers who were no wiser about how he would actually do the job. The candidate from Nigeria told a rather long story and took a while to get to the point. This relied on the interviewer having the patience and foresight to wait for the answer to come. All these cultural differences may affect a person's ability to get a job and an interviewer's ability to spot the best candidate.

The group then discussed how this related to the learning and work place and they discussed their experience in Newham College. They offered examples from their own teaching and learning. The following 'hidden rules' were identified:

- Punctuality – in UK culture it is generally seen as a sign of respect to arrive on time. People who are late can be seen as lazy or unreliable. In

many cultures, particularly African cultures, this is not the case and can lead to misunderstanding.

- Levels of familiarity – in Newham College, it is usual to call the teacher by their first name. Many cultures, including Indian and Pakistani, find this disrespectful. In the workplace, it is usual to call colleagues by their first name and perhaps to go to lunch or have tea with them. Superiors in the hierarchy are often treated differently and it can be hard to know how people should be addressed and what level of familiarity is appropriate.
- It can take time for students/workers to understand these kinds of hidden rules which leads to them taking longer to settle in to their role.

#### **4. Intercultural Case Studies – Small Group Discussion and Feedback**

In this sessions, participants broke into 3 groups – 2 groups of teachers/trainers and a group of students. The teachers/trainers were given 2 scenarios outlining problems between students and trainers. The groups were asked to discuss and report back on how the issues could have been avoided in the first place and what could be done to resolve them.

Group discussion included students so was 2-way. It was very wide ranging. Several points were raised and discussed:

- Students don't always contribute to discussions because they are unsure of the classroom protocol
- Students often nominate someone confident to speak for them – this could be overcome with pair or small group work
- Students can sometimes intimidate teachers – on example was a class who bowed to the teacher and constantly took photographs of her.
- Students from Pakistan recalled that in school, they work for short periods of time and then have lots of breaks where they play games or do puzzles. Concentrating for long periods in the classroom is not something they have learned to do so they can get bored and left behind.
- Phrasal verbs are not understood by people new to English (example – 'the aeroplane is taking off' was something the students did not understand at all)
- Announcements on tubes are really unclear and hard to understand – students just picked out key words and hoped!
- Body language is a big issue. Some cultures use their hands to speak (e.g. French speakers) and lots of facial expression. Others find this intimidating. In Asian countries, folding arms is a mark of respect. In many cultures, including the UK, this is a sign that someone is 'closed off'
- Idioms are hard to understand
- Students often translate into their own language in their head and then translate back into English. This never works and takes time so the student often then gets lost.
- English is learnt in many countries in many forms and there are a multitude of accents. In many cases, two people both speaking English may not be able to understand each other!

Suggestions for overcoming misunderstandings included:

- Set ground rules and explain classroom etiquette.
- Ensure initial assessments are comprehensive and accurate and ensure that issues are addressed in 1:1 tutorials
- Reflective practice – pair work, group work, report back
- Early intervention by tutors via observations and questions and 1:1 tutorials
- Use of differentiated tasks
- Awareness of cultural norms and values by discussing personal experiences
- Cultural awareness training for tutors and induction training for students/workers new to the country or culture
- Listing main technical terms and explaining them fully and in context
- Repetition of key words and meanings
- Using simplified and appropriate language (helps everyone)
- Production of resources in different forms to reflect different learning styles
- Additional English or literacy support where required
- Teacher should ensure they speak clearly and if they have a strong accent they should make sure they use different ways to explain things
- Tolerance of differences in things like customs, food, etc. – some may want to take cigarette breaks, others may want prayer breaks
- Learn about queuing!

## **5. Discussion of Issues and Recommendations**

Many recommendations are contained in the bullet points above. Others will come from the questionnaires completed by workshop participants (to be added).