Mapping Bias and Stereotypes

Overview

The goal of this lesson is to provide a clear understanding of cultural generalisations vs. cultural stereotypes. Allowing students to explore the stereotypes within their own culture will help students be able to see situations from a different perspective, encouraging them to recognise the power of perspective in our experiences with cultural differences.

Learning Objectives:

During this activity participants will:
- Reflect on the subtle way stereotypes are created and reinforced;
- Recognise stereotypes within their own culture;
- Differentiate between a cultural generalisation and a cultural stereotype.

Educational Goals supported:
- Self-awareness
- Critical thinking
- Cultural knowledge and awareness

Target audience: students ages 15-18 years old
Group size: 15-30 students
Required Time: 70 min

Materials:

Flipchart paper or a white - or blackboard
Coloured markers/chalk
A few mainstream magazines (business magazines, beauty magazines, fashion magazines, etc.). Provide a variety of titles if possible
Prepared chart with the instructions for the activity with the magazines
Internet connection
Computer and video projection

Notes to Facilitator:

It is important to have a thorough understanding of the difference between stereotypes and generalisations, and the benefits of generalisations in intercultural interactions before conducting the activity (see Resources section for reading suggestions).

Description of the activity step-by-step

Begin by introducing the instructions to students: "Each of you will receive a magazine. Your task: You are a visitor from another galaxy. Headquarters sent you to earth to gather demographic information about the population. Your only source is the magazines and since you don't read, you can only look at the pictures.

Be prepared to report back to your headquarters on population estimates, diversity of the population, impressions about the different species, which species seem to have different roles, and who seems to be in charge". Distribute the magazines and instruct students to begin their search and write down some of their findings. Give them about 10 minutes to complete this task.

Facilitate a discussion by asking several volunteers to report their findings. Ask questions such as the following:
- How do these images represent us?
- What are the implications of a steady diet of these images?
- Do they have an impact (unconsciously) on our perceptions?

Explain that the assumptions we have about cultures are widespread and fall into the categories of generalisations and stereotypes and present the difference between stereotypes and generalisations as described in the Generalisations & Stereotypes document:

"Generalising about cultures means that you assign similar characteristics to most members of that particular culture, but you are still flexible enough to incorporate new information about that group once you have it. Hopefully, this flexibility can also turn into more cultural curiosity and awareness and improve your intercultural relationships. Generalisations are unavoidable and they can even be helpful in making sense of complex intercultural settings. Generalisations become stereotypes when you assume all members of a group have exactly the same characteristics. Stereotypes can be linked to more than just gender, age or nationality. More often than not, they are very negative and tend to be less flexible to new information. They often create prejudice and discrimination, not allowing us to understand individual differences and understand others."

To illustrate the difference between cultural generalisations and stereotypes, have students find pictures in the magazines, share them with the class, and have the class deal with turning stereotypes about the picture into generalisations, for instance:
- Picture of people at a baseball game or other sport: "Many people in the U.S. attend X sport" vs "Everyone in the United States loves this sport."
- Surfer photo or something similar… "Many people in CA like to surf, are in good shape, and are tan" vs "Everybody in CA likes to surf, have blond hair, and keep in good shape"