

Reflective Essay and Self Evaluation

TES-372

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Throughout the course of this class, I have been given the unique opportunity to learn about the lives of immigrants and refugees through class lectures, homework, and service learning.

One of the first points that I made in my perceptions paper at the beginning of the quarter was that I knew very little about the lives, cultures, backgrounds, and challenges faced by immigrants and refugees. Over the nine weeks that I went to the Adult Education Center of Spokane, my understanding of the cultures, backgrounds, and challenges faced by immigrants and refugees grew significantly. First of all, through multiple PowerPoint presentations that our level 3 students gave, I had the opportunity to learn more about the countries that immigrant students come from. These presentations were about the holidays, food, history, and topography of countries like the Marshall Islands, Ukraine, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In addition to learning about the cultures that students come from, I got to engage in conversations where I learned about the backgrounds of certain students. I especially enjoyed talking with girls who were the same age as me. One of the girls in my group was born in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, one was born in Ukraine, and one was born in Afghanistan. Talking to them about school and work, however, I realized that we had much more in common than I would have thought. I also learned more about the challenges that immigrants and refugees face. In class lectures, I learned that the aid that refugees receive does not last forever. The movie *Rain in a Dry Land* illustrated how difficult earning money can be for families that are struggling to learn

English and receive an education. I also learned that immigrants receive no funding from the federal government and that a lot of the support that refugees get comes from charities and state-specific aid. Now, ten weeks after writing my perceptions paper, I have learned so much more about the lives, cultures, backgrounds, and challenges faced by immigrants and refugees.

Another point that I made in my perceptions paper at the beginning of the semester was that I knew very little about the immigrant and refugee population in Spokane. I guessed that the majority of the immigrant and refugee population in Spokane was from Mexico, but I was incorrect. In class, we learned that the largest population of immigrants in the Spokane area are actually from the Marshall Islands, and, during my time at the Adult Education Center of Spokane, I met no one from Mexico. I always assumed that Spokane was not a very diverse community, but, after volunteering, I was pleasantly surprised to learn that this was not the case.

In class, we learned that showing compassion and love is the best way to make students comfortable. As someone who is not the best at socializing, I found this very helpful and kept going back to this thought during service learning. In our second lecture, I found it interesting when we learned that some students speak well but don't write well and vice versa. I found this to be true during service learning, as I was very impressed with some students' writing skills while other students had impressive speaking skills. I wonder whether personal learning styles or previous language skills affect an individual's writing and speaking skills more. In our lecture, we also learned that it can take students 2 years to acquire social language and 5-7 years to acquire academic language. This was interesting to me because I had never really thought about how difficult it can be to master a new language. Another important thing that I learned in class was that reverse culture shock can be very difficult. For example, in *The Other Side of the Sky: A*

Memoir, Farah experiences reverse culture shock when she returns to Afghanistan after living in Germany for a couple years. As someone who is interested in living in a different country for a few years, I found this information to be very interesting.

One of the most surprising things that was talked about in our class lectures was the idea of unconscious, language-activated biases and how we find it strange when someone does not speak the way that we expect them to speak. (For example, expecting someone of a different racial background to have a certain accent or tone of voice.) A final thing that I liked was the guest speaker and legal consultant that came and presented. I never knew how the different immigration statuses worked or what seeking asylum is. More importantly, I liked learning about the different rights and liberties that different people groups in the US have. I have mostly been around other US citizens, so it is easy to forget that there are other groups of people living here, such as people on various visas and undocumented immigrants. I found it sad how a lot of undocumented children do not always have access to things like healthcare. Overall, the things that I learned in class really broadened my understanding of the lives of immigrants and refugees and made me more thoughtful and compassionate.

During my sessions at the service learning site, I began to recognize that one of the largest barriers for people coming into the US is learning English. On a couple of occasions in my life, I have heard the insensitive statement: "They should just learn English." For people who have never had to learn a second language and move to a different country, this may seem like a reasonable statement. I think that it can be easy for some people to think that immigrants and refugees "aren't trying hard enough" to learn the language of the country they have moved to. However, I believe that if these people saw how difficult and confusing English can be to those

learning it for the first time, they would be much more sympathetic. In fact, many of the students were eager to learn the language so that they could get better jobs and follow their dreams. Many of these individuals have so much more to offer than one might think. For example, the clerk with the heavy accent at the store you go to might actually be a licensed doctor in another country. (One of the students at the Adult Education Center of Spokane was working as a clerk while getting the language proficiency and education to become a doctor in the US.) Other students were engineers, teachers, etc. Helping students learn English, I realized that the language skills of an individual can prevent others from realizing that individual's brilliance, humor, and personality. In the future, when interacting with immigrants and refugees, I hope to take this lesson with me and learn to recognize what that individual is truly like instead of being distracted by something as small as an accent.

In addition to what I learned in class and service learning, I also learned new things while reading this course's books. My favorite book was *The Other Side of the Sky: A Memoir*; it reminded me of everything that I have to be thankful for - my family, my friends, an education, my health, a safe place to live, good medical care, etc. The book made me a lot more sympathetic as a person while giving me a desire to help others who might have gone through situations like Farah's. Similarly, by reading *Of Beetles and Angels*, I learned that it is important to have patience with people who have gone through a lot in their lives. For example, Selamawi and his siblings often got in fights during school, stole candy on Halloween, and might generally be seen as rowdy children. However, with support from people in the community, like Selamawi's coach Kroger, who encouraged him to run, and Charlene, who sang songs and took the children to play soccer, Selamawi became the man he is today. Finally, in *American Dreams, Global Visions*, I

got to learn about being a cultural storyteller, healer, and worker. Specifically, for me, the idea of being a cultural healer is inspiring because I want to understand where other people are coming from and figure out why people do the things they do. I have realized that, through understanding and listening to others, healing can take place in the lives of people who have gone through so much. Overall, I found that the books I read broadened my perspectives and made me more sensitive and aware of what I can do to make the lives of immigrants and refugees just a tiny bit better.

As a computer science major, working with immigrants and refugees may not seem like a worthwhile experience. However, to me, it was. Though I am not sure if I will be in the Spokane area to help at this particular ESL center, I do hope to find something similar to be involved in in the future. For example, one of the churches I went to hosted an ESL class, and I didn't seriously consider working there at the time. However, now, and in the future, I would be willing and excited to help out. In addition to future volunteer work, this class might be helpful in my career as well. Many computer programmers are now being employed online from around the world. Often, there are misunderstandings and difficulties when an American company decides to hire programmers who reside halfway across the world. In the future, I also hope to be more involved in the academic community and travel a lot more. This will require a respect and understanding for other cultures and people, and the ability to understand people who are different from me will be incredibly important.

Through the class lectures, homework, and service learning, my perceptions of the lives of immigrants and refugees has changed dramatically. From the ideas of what cultural and ethnic groups exist in our community to the realization of how hard secondary language acquisition can

be, my awareness of our immigrant and refugee populations has increased. For me, one of the most memorable things was the connections that I was able to make with other students my age. In the future, regardless of where I am, I hope to be a cultural storyteller, healer, and worker in order to help others while creating a greater awareness of the lives of immigrants and refugees.