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Stories of Validation for *Connecting Heart and Mind*

Tell me, and I will forget.
Show me, and I may remember.
Involve me, and I will understand.

—Confucian proverb (450 BCE)

Race riots in Los Angeles, and the Transition Institutes

During the spring of 2005, several Southern California high schools experienced large-scale conflicts that many felt were the result of friction stemming from racialized gangs that had negatively impacted the community for years. The involved youth and the conflicts fell primarily between African American and Latino students. The incidents included hundreds of students and staff and made national headlines, prompting immediate and decisive action.

To address the problem, one of the larger districts in Los Angeles green-lighted a pilot program called the Transition Institutes (TI), created by Standing on Common Ground (SOCG), a Los Angeles–based human-relations organization. The goal was to directly and immediately address a key issue apparent during the conflicts in that spring of 2005: ninth grade students were the source of about 90% of the problems.



L.A. Councilman Dennis Zine (center)
and the students of Watts, CA (winter 2010)

As a result, in summer 2006, SOCG implemented the inaugural edition of the Transition Institutes. The activities found in *CH&M* served as the instructional centerpiece of the TI process. The pilot schools for the 2006 project were Thomas Jefferson High School, Santee Education Complex, and New Tech High School, a Gates Foundation school located on the Jefferson campus. Over 2000 ninth grade students took part that summer.

The Transition Institutes required all ninth grade students from these three schools to participate in a five-day, off-campus human-relations workshop. The students, therefore, were not cherry-picked, and no one was excluded from the process. In addition, several staff members from the respective schools also took part.

So effective were the TI that one of the principals shared that “without the TI, our school would still be in a state of chaos.” Some of the astounding results documented as part of the 2006 pilot program were:

Stories of Validation for *Connecting Heart and Mind*

- an 85% decrease in freshman suspensions at Santee Education Complex
- a 10% increase in attendance at New Tech High School
- a 71-point increase in the California Standards Test for ninth grade students at Jefferson High School.

Clearly, it would be unfair for the Transition Institutes and the activities from *CH&M* to take complete credit for the transformation and growth of the three schools. However, as indicated by the countless testimonials from school and district leadership, as well as the fact that all three schools continue to implement some form of TI to this very day, the impact is undeniable. (TI videos and testimonials can be found at www.standingoncommonground.org.)

Rampant bullying and homophobia at a San Diego middle school

During the spring of 2007, one San Diego middle school chose to enlist the support of SOCG to utilize the activities in *CH&M*. A series of homophobic bullying incidents had plagued the school for over two years.



At this particular school, groups of students would roam around campus during nutrition and lunch looking for primarily male targets identified as or suspected of being “gay,” and then harassed or assaulted them. The problem had been exacerbated by several incidents of cyberbullying carried out through social-networking sites regularly visited by the vast majority of the student body. In light of the spate of “bully-cides” across the U.S. in 2010, it was a justifiable cause for alarm and immediate action.

As a result, the school implemented the Peer Partnership Program (P3) and offered several forms of intervention. Key components of the P3 included weekly meetings focusing on empathy, weekend retreats in the mountains to train natural leaders as “change agents,” and professional development focused on improving the culture and climate of their beleaguered campus. As a part of this process, *CH&M* activities were used and ultimately served as the catalysts for badly needed growth and change.

As recommended in this book, the school invited a group of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) speakers to share their “coming out” stories and their own experiences of being harassed and marginalized. Several of the students who had been responsible for much of the homophobic bullying apologized for their actions directly to the teachers, administration, and the victims themselves. In the words of one of the perpetrators, “I can’t believe I acted that way and said those things. Whether someone is gay or not shouldn’t matter to me. Why should I treat someone that way because of who they fall in love with?”

Module I: Knowing Thyself— The Power of Personal Story

Big-picture concept

Every journey begins with the first step, and Module I is designed to familiarize the participants with the essence and the spirit of the activities in *CH&M* in a way that encourages full participation and buy-in.

Knowing Thyself—The Power of Personal Story is designed to encourage students to fully embrace the self-disclosure process and lay a solid foundation for what promises to be a valuable experience for all. The vehicle for this process is the collective stories and experiences to be shared by the participants through the activities.

The specific objectives of Module I are for participants to:

- fundamentally accept and value who they are as individuals
- understand the power of empathy and the importance of sharing and hearing personal stories
- recognize the importance of group cohesion, cooperation and respect.

For Module I to achieve its goals, there must be a solid foundation of trust between and among the participants. The safety and security of any group is predicated on the development of strong relationships in which communication is valued and empathy is a given. When students are engaged in conversations about who they are, where they've come from, and where they'd like to go in life, there can be no doubt about whether all group members are going to respect the vulnerability and courage inherent in the process.

Driving questions

- Do you trust people as a rule? Why or why not?
- Is it possible to create healthy relationships with people without a solid foundation of trust?
- Is there value in sharing your personal story with others?
- Is any one person's journey or story more valuable than another's?
- Can the climate and culture of a school affect how much students trust each other? Why?
- Can you be successful in life (e.g., jobs, relationships, satisfaction) without knowing and trusting yourself first?

Module I: Knowing Thyself—The Power of Personal Story

Introduction

- Once your trust has been violated, can you learn to trust again?
- Do you believe all people have a purpose and/or calling?
- What role, if any, do cultural differences play in the creation of trust, since trust is built in different ways and means different things in different cultures
- What is the key to effective communication?
- Does the manner in which adults treat each other on campus have an impact on the culture and climate of a school?

For the facilitator: These activities are user-friendly and time-tested. They have been presented in a variety of contexts and to audiences from elementary to graduate school.

As with all of the activities in *CH&M*, Module I activities are aligned with state and national standards and the principles of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy. They are accessible to all students, regardless of demographic, and include English language learners, special-needs students, and those with behavioral challenges. They are multi-modal and can be expanded or contracted to fit whatever time is available for the lesson.

Lastly, remember that students will follow the teacher's lead, whatever type of modeling is offered. This stands to also be true in terms of energy, passion, and commitment. Therefore, it is critical to endorse the value of *CH&M* activities by diving in fully and leading by example. Without teachers whose presenting style embodies inspiration and investment, students will typically not rise to the occasion.

Module I activities and resources

1. Your Power Object
2. Get up, Stand Up
3. Do You Hear What I Hear?
4. Rules of Engagement
5. Culture Quest/This Is How *We* Do It
6. "I Am From..." Poems
7. Step to the Edge
8. Edge Bracelets
9. Module Extensions

Your Power Object

Teacher Pages

Overview

3–5 minutes per person per object

This activity is a wonderful opportunity for students to share intimate aspects of their lives through symbols and icons of their personal history.

This activity defines a power object as a tangible item that brings comfort, strength and hope to a person in times of struggle or challenge. Throughout history, people have celebrated and relied on such objects to carry them across thresholds of the unknown and mysterious. A power object is not about cost or sparkle but rather the significance and value it holds for the individual; therefore, it may be a picture, letter, stuffed animal, etc. The power object is always treated with reverence, and you should reiterate this point.

Similar to many other activities in the program, **Your Power Object** is an avenue to self-disclosure of students' hopes, dreams, fears, regrets, etc., and may lead to a cathartic experience for the participants. In many cases, it stirs emotions that have sometimes lain dormant for years.

Objectives—Participants will:

- share an aspect of their personal story through something that can be seen, felt, or heard
- witness the power and intensity of emotions that emanate from the symbols of their lives and experiences, feelings that often lay dormant just below the surface of the “public persona”
- familiarize themselves with the process of catharsis to ease the general group attitude toward emoting, especially at the middle and high school level.

Vocabulary:

- catharsis (a psychotherapeutic process that encourages or permits the discharge of pent-up emotions and tensions)
- emotion
- heritage
- power
- public persona
- talisman

Grade level: 4–12



Whole class

Module 1: Knowing Thyself—The Power of Personal Story

Your Power Object

Group size: Any

Time: Three to five minutes per person per object, with the caveat that they are allowed to share their object at any point during process, depending on when they feel ready to step out and take a chance with the group

Materials:

- Your Power Object: Student Handout
- Power objects



Whole class



Read or say

Procedures

1. Introduce the activity by holding up an item (or a picture of it) that is your own power object, and begin to tell a story regarding its significance.
2. After telling the story, ask the students if they thought the act of a teacher sharing personal information is a good or a bad thing, and why.
3. Explore the notion of storytelling and ask the students

Who assumes the role of storyteller in your family?

Typically it is the dad, mom, grandparents, uncle, brother, etc. Explain that in this activity, they will tell their own story.

4. Quickly brainstorm the elements that make a good storyteller and chart or write them on the board.
5. Distribute the student handout, and ask for a volunteer to read the directions.
6. Ask the students if they understand the nature of the activity. It is important for them to know that they can share their particular power object at a time of their choosing. It is also acceptable to share multiple objects, if time permits.
7. Take the opportunity to ask if anyone might coincidentally have a power object on them at that very moment. People do tend to wear or carry something personal on them (e.g., a ring, bracelet, necklace, etc.) that might serve as an immediate example of a power object (as well as what a "share" looks like).
8. Remind them that, as in all other aspects of the *Connecting Heart and Mind* process, you won't force them to share, but they are strongly encouraged to jump in when they feel comfortable.

Your Power Object

Student Handout

One of the primary goals of the *Connecting Heart and Mind* process is for you to get to know your classmates on a deeper level. One of the ways you do this is by sharing a part of your personal story and history, for better or worse, positive or negative. One of your homework assignments throughout the process is to bring a power object to share with the group at a time of your choosing.

A power object is something that means a lot to you for whatever reason. It can be a picture, a letter, an award you may have won—anything that brings you strength and confidence in times of hardship or struggle. At any point in the process you can volunteer to share your power object with the group. If time permits, you can share more than one.

Thank you in advance for your courage and participation.

Power object examples:

