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From Reality to the Theory : Evolution and Adaptation, *Vanier College*

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In most courses, pedagogues will insist that the theoretical framework must be mastered before being able to apply theories to the reality one wants to transform. At Vanier our reality has moved forward at such a dizzying pace that we have often found ourselves transforming and adapting to deal with situations long before we have had a chance to analyse the implications of what is happening and how we are dealing with it. The demographics of our student population have evolved continuously over the last 20 years and the college and its classes and structures have had to accommodate the change.

Vanier is rich and diverse, interesting, exciting, and often controversial. Nevertheless, while we live side by side in a rich multicultural pastiche, it is sad that we don't always understand each other and that there is often little exchange between groups and little exploration of commonalities or differences. Often students will feel marginalised or discouraged because of their immigrant backgrounds, and their weak language skills. In counterpart, the teachers can feel overwhelmed or frustrated trying to teach to such a broad range of backgrounds sitting in one classroom.

In The Learning Centre and Student Services, we are process oriented and have a long-standing commitment to giving students a chance to shine, to find value in their talents and to celebrate their achievements. Over the years we have become adept at helping them present their pride in their culture and share it with others. We also strive to help faculty see this diversity as an untapped resource and opportunity, rather than an impediment or distraction.

■ Declaration of Intent

This led us to our project to develop a college policy on interculturalism. The aim was to allow us to reflect on the process of demographic change we were undergoing, to articulate the reality we live and publicise our collective achievements. We wanted to heighten awareness in the college community and continue our philosophy of turning negatives into positives. It also provides a record for the future and a measure against which evaluation can be made. Public statements such as the *Declaration of Intent: Interculturalism at Vanier* become a key part of the collective memory.

We could have very easily speeded up the process and satisfied the Ministry requirements by asking the senior college administration to endorse a policy and put up a plaque in the foyer of the front entrance. However, we felt that this would be superficial and not have much impact on the community at-large. We felt it was important to gain a consensus from as wide a spectrum of the college constituency as possible. To do this we had to resort to one of our most successful tactics – food. An invitation was sent out to everybody who attended the Fall Pedagogical Day in 2000 to come to a meeting to discuss intercultural issues. We offered the added bonus of an exotic lunch cooked up by our own cafeteria staff, who were ecstatic at the possibility of cooking something other than hamburgers and poutine and prepared a brilliant meal with a Carribean theme. A relatively small number came, but were impressed enough with the meal to stay and help us launch our process. They wanted to do it again our reputation was established.

Several principles guided this effort. First, it couldn't seem like work and had to have a healthy dose of fun. So our subsequent meeting was billed as the Multicultural Forum to avoid using that much hated word « committee ». Our agenda was basically fun. People shared ideas around the table about what everyone was already doing and what experience we already have. This led to the pamphlet *Pedagogical Practices*.

The Ministry's idea of a policy on multiculturalism was seen as an excellent way to arouse interest and give public recognition to what we do as a matter of daily lifestyle. This led to the articulation of the *Declaration of Intent: Interculturalism at Vanier* and a process of gaining agreement from the different policy bodies of the institution. Here, as well, we wanted to preclude resistance, so we avoided the word « policy » and spoke of a declaration of Intent. We consulted the departments, coordinators, administrators, the political structures of the college, the Academic Council, Joint Coordinators and the Board of Directors. Our initiative was universally well received.

■ Plan of Action

Sociopedagogical

Our ongoing strategy has involved featuring the *Declaration of Intent* by posting it in prominent places around the college. It will also appear in next year's *Student Agenda*. We will continue our discussions with faculty in the Multicultural Forum and expand the participation to include the Vanier College Students' Association. We are already planning exchanges with other colleges as a method of sharing the wealth of our milieu and allowing our populace insights into the reality of Quebec outside the metropolitan area. The publication of writings by the students will continue to feature as a major activity. On the one hand, we publish the writings of students new to the English language to validate their experiences and raise their self-esteem. On the other hand, we use the creative writing contest as a means to allow aspiring authors a chance to present their material. Frequently their themes deal with issues of multiculturalism.

Sociocultural

« Bringing Students Together » was one of our grant titles. There is very little room or time for discrimination and conflict, when students learn about each other, and are in regular contact with different groups and having fun together. Sharing ideas about values gives them an appreciation of their respective cultures. At the end of the Fall semester, we held a festival of festivals at which all the different religions on campus set up a kiosk and presented a special celebration from their tradition. They also served food. In the absence of common



holiday festivities, St. Valentine's and Halloween have become enormously popular with students from all Vanier's communities. These days are really college wide days of celebration and fun. Gift cards are exchanged, poems written, contests entered, flowers delivered, pumpkins carved and costumes worn. The organisation is cooperative and participatory to avoid being top-down imposed events.

The serious side of discrimination is not ignored either. Opposing groups in other parts of the world have to co-exist in the Vanier environment. The Hillel Club and the Vanier Islamic Students Association organise an annual soccer game to promote this harmony. A policy of « Zero Tolerance of Discrimination » features large in the Student Agenda and an orientation. We strongly promote Anti-Racism Day, Black History Month as well as a variety of community events. In particular our annual « Nite of Nations » talent show allows every community to demonstrate their culture with pride. Respect and tolerance are the cornerstones of our philosophy and these manifest themselves in everything we try to do.

For the future, we will continue to respond to the constantly changing needs of our students and faculty. The *Declaration of Intent* is not the end of the process. Its lofty goals need to be made concrete and part of the everyday reality of everyone at Vanier. We want to reach more students and touch them in more ways. There is a significant turnover of faculty each semester and the new faces can offer us new insights and approaches as well as require our support as they are initiated into Vanier's life. We are continually striving to understand the constantly evolving population that we are dealing with. Thank you to Service interculturel collégial and to the Ministry of Education for their support in our efforts.