

## **Moving from “I” to “Thou”: Bridging the Barriers of Age and Culture at the Community College**

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*America has long been a nation experiencing various levels of denial about the depth of racial bigotry and its history, scars, and legacy. We exaggerate some progress, ignore evidence of continued bigotry and inequality, and celebrate our diversity, more by eating tacos, pizza, bagels, and Chinese food than through interpersonal relations.*

**Lenny Zakim, 1997**

For community college students, many of whom must work, have family obligations, and who live and work in environments ghettoized by poverty, race, ethnicity and even age, the college campus may be the one arena where a student body as diverse as ours has an opportunity to mingle freely with “the other.” How else can students gain a more personal sense of the reality of someone who does not look, or sound, or think like them? Is this not one of the objectives of an education “for the real world”? Bunker Hill Community College, with its rich mosaic of students, has made enormous progress in providing all of our students with opportunities to learn from and about each other; and yet, we can do more.

### **Getting to Know Someone from an Earlier Time**

I was first struck by the insulation, the “here and now” world view held by many of my writing students some ten or fifteen years ago. Their own little corner of the world, their own tight circle of friends was their reality. Few of them had contact, let alone friendships, with someone of another race, culture, or even age. At that time, I was becoming sensitive to the stereotyping of people of “a certain age,” since I was reaching that “certain age.” This “born yesterday” generation had seemingly little sense of history, of a time other than its own. Listening to their classroom discussions and reading their papers, I saw few of them evincing any real curiosity, not only about the past but about the personal history of their own parents. Students all uniformly seemed to love and revere their grandmothers, but except for responding to their grandmothers’ non-judgmental nurturing, they knew little about Grandma’s life before she became Grandma.

At that time, I was teaching College Writing I, which requires the writing of essays based on various rhetorical modes. I decided that one of the required essays should be based on an in-depth interview of someone over sixty. For those without a grandmother, this presented an obstacle. Many did not know anyone over sixty, or even over fifty! Ours has become a very impermeable, age-layered society. The “over sixty” requirement had to become negotiable.

I developed a questionnaire (see Assignment A, p. 22) from which the students could choose or amplify questions to act as a springboard for a meaningful conversation. I cautioned the students that this was to be a “conversation,” not a clipped question and answer exchange, and that it required a minimum of two hours. This was not to be conducted on the telephone, but face to face. The questions included both personal and

social history, focusing on the youth and early adulthood of the interviewee. They ranged from mundane questions about the bathroom, the number of sinks in the house, ice boxes and refrigerators, party-line telephones, schooling, teachers, children's games, and how teens socialized to weightier questions about early working conditions, unions, strikes, the Depression, the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Works Progress Administration, World War II, being drafted, being sent overseas during wartime, blackouts, presidents, family stories or traditions, family arguments, experiencing prejudice, and how the elders viewed the younger generation. The students were advised to seek concrete answers, but if they sensed they were beginning to tread on sensitive, personal areas, not to probe further.

The results, both written and personal, were impressive. Many of the conversations arched back to times and experiences the students had not even read about in history texts. Darrin interviewed Ghazi, an Armenian co-worker who grew up in Davenport, Iowa amongst blond, blue-eyed children of German descent. Ghazi's parents had fled Armenia "because the Turks from a neighbouring country had invaded their villages and were killing everyone."

Judith interviewed Mario, her father-in-law, whose Depression experiences left him with "an insecurity that he has carried with him all his life," a time when "the talk at home always revolved around money" and "idle, bitter men were locked in grave discussions of economic survival." Mario "still worries whether his savings will last him for the years he has left."

Lauren's mother, brought up in Somerville, remembered the fear of air raids during World War II. "A loud siren would go off and blankets had to be put over the windows to blacken the house. No lights were allowed. Air raid wardens were assigned to areas to make sure the rules were being followed." Some students learned, for the first time, about wartime rationing, when even those with money needed a coupon to buy most food and shoes.

An Italian-American student finally learned why his uncle had only three fingers on his right hand. When World War II ended in one southern Italian village, some young farm hands were assigned to clear the war's debris from the fields in order to make them ready for planting. His uncle picked up a live German grenade and suddenly became a three-fingered man.

Rhoda learned how her grandmother was able to get out of Germany shortly after *Kristalnacht*, "the night the soldiers smashed windows, houses, stores and synagogues of Jews...and began taking all Jewish men ages fourteen and older to the concentration camps." Later, on board a ship bound for England, her grandmother heard "the news that Hitler had invaded Poland."

In all these conversations, personal history had coalesced with national and world history. Students were learning that history is not an abstraction. The stereotypical old ladies, the watery-eyed old men were gone, and human beings leaped from the pages. One sweet grandma divorced Gramp when he "literally gambled the business away." When her second husband would "lock Gram in a room with mothballs because she was allergic to them," she still stayed with him because he was "a good provider." Although another old grandmother was addicted to making "hateful racist" comments, and went "out of her way to wear orange clothing on St. Patrick's Day," the writer came to understand her grandmother's "misguided anger as the only channel of release for... a

cold and lonely life.” Another student with a spitfire grandmother concluded: “I attribute her sharp tongue to having spent twenty years as a waitress, ninety years in Jersey City, and sixty years as a mother.” One student came to finally have some understanding of her rigid, matriarchal Chinese mother-in-law who, as a teenager during the Japanese occupation, “would make her face dirty to prevent the Japanese soldiers from taking her prisoner.”

One student described shaking “the leather-like hand with the piney spike hairs growing out of them” belonging to an old Irishman. In his description, the student could also see “the well-built, handsome, smiling man” the Irishman had been.

Mr. Bowen, a 64-year-old neighbor who grew up in Idaho, described being taken to see *Gone with the Wind* when it first appeared in movie theaters. That film became a line of demarcation in his life. “There was a ‘before’ and now he would live with the ‘after’.” Rather than being attracted to Scarlet O’Hara, as his father was, Mr. Bowen’s sympathies lay with Rhett Butler. At the age of fourteen, he realized he was different. He returned that evening with a sick feeling in his stomach, and already a longing for “the little boy who died at a movie palace in Boise.”

One ancient spent his Sundays at the telephone lines “writing bets of all kinds (straights, teasers, parlays)...football action is a major source of income, and depending on the day’s results, it provides him with an alternative life style of being temporarily wealthy or perilously close to not being able to pay the phone bill — which is the equivalent of Beethoven *sans* piano.”

Finally, one student named Clarice, already in her 60’s, did not need to search for a suitable subject. She chose to interview a member of her Baptist congregation, a gentleman with whom she had had only a nodding acquaintance. When I ran into her in the supermarket a year later, she thanked me for the assignment. The man she had interviewed was now her “steady.”

Writing about someone the students knew and for whom they had some feeling produced some vivid images. One grandfather “used to walk around the house in his old, ratty robe and eat stale Fig Newtons. I remember he used to just sit on the front porch, eat and smoke Pall Mall filterless cigarettes. He just seemed to get older and older out there.”

Another student discovered “men returning from work covered with the dust of red bricks which they had fashioned into some useful structure.” Antonia described her great-aunt among “rocks and boulders in a clear mountain stream in Italy which were the scrubbing boards for doing the laundry.”

### **Getting to Know Someone from a Different Place**

These positive results lead to my second epiphany, one more directly related to the students at BHCC. By the mid-1980s, our student population had, due in part to our very fine English as a Second Language program, become considerably enriched by students of different colors, races, religions and languages. Yet, despite the tremendous and unique opportunity for human interchange available on our campus, in our student lounges and meeting rooms, students still seemed to be clustered in pods, clinging to their “own kind.” For some foreign students, BHCC may have been the only place where they could practice their new language with native speakers in a natural setting; however the safety of the pod prevented them from doing so. To me, it seemed like such a loss of opportunity.

I suggested to two members of the ESL Department, Michelle Schweitzer and Jessica Bethony, that we combine my English classes with their ESL classes for at least two sessions so that the students could interview each other and then use the interviews as the basis for writing profiles about each other. I developed a questionnaire (see Assignment B, p. 22) for the students in my English classes to interview someone from another culture; meanwhile, Michelle and Jessica developed similar questionnaires (see Assignment C, p. 23) for their ESL students. The questions revolved around work, working conditions, study, entertainment, sports, family structure, students' reasons for leaving their native countries, and their reactions to being thrust into a new and strange environment.

For many of my American-born students in those years, this was the first time they had conducted a personal conversation of some depth with a foreign student. The ESL students looked forward to the experience with enthusiasm; here was a chance to really exchange more than two sentences with an "American." There was some resistance from several of my "native" students, both white and African-American, an undercurrent of resentment toward immigrants who were getting "preferential treatment." However, when they all got together, after some initial shyness, the mood and the tempo became electric. For many of my students, the experience was image-altering.

When I brought my writing group into the ESL classroom, many of the smiling ESL students stood up. I had the sensation we were being cheered, applauded. We three instructors tried to match each student to a suitable partner. Some of my students later wrote of their apprehensions: "I am usually uncomfortable in situations where new characters are introduced, and especially so when it is someone with whom I might feel guilty about being a wealthy American — one of the world's elite. As Duong approached me, I could feel the tension begin to surface and my defense mechanisms go up." Another wrote, "I am ashamed to admit to the preconceptions and prejudices with which I came to this interview."

In only two hours of conversation, horizons were broadened, sympathies deepened. Many students commented that they were lucky to be Americans. "My childhood memories are of baseball, schoolyards, and summers at the beach. His childhood memories are of fighting, bombings, and summers in fear." One student who interviewed a 70-year-old Russian-Jewish man whose entire family had been buried alive wrote: "I don't have an experience of war; I've only heard about it."

Another student was suddenly aware of his own provincialism: "What really shocked me is that he (a Lebanese Muslim) knows more about American foreign policy than I do, which reflects poorly on my citizenship as an American." Another experienced the revelation that "the planets don't revolve around the United States!"

Many students became aware of differences in lifestyle as their interview partners described working conditions in Russia, in Haiti, in Vietnam. They also exchanged information about wages, levels of unemployment, street cleaning, the subway system, the restrictions on teenage dating in some cultures, the family shame when an unmarried child moves into his own apartment, and, of course, the inevitable comparison of salaries and living expenses. Sarah, a parking enforcement officer who earned \$900 a month, interviewed Mr. Chu, who had worked on a rice farm in China where he earned the equivalent of \$50 a week for forty-eight hours of work. The disparity shocked her until she learned that his rent was \$10 a month and utilities \$20. When Sarah told Mr. Chu

that her rent was \$400 and her utilities \$100, “he was no longer impressed with my salary.”

A number of my students came away with a new appreciation for their own freedom from governmental interference in choosing where to live, where to work, which hospital to go to, where and when to travel, and what to say. Americans “just have to buy a plane ticket, have a passport, and they’re off.” Some heard, for the first time, stories of perilous illegal journeys on boats that were hardly seaworthy. Most came away with a deepened understanding of the magnitude of what these immigrants had lost — their families, their professions, their very adulthood. A Chinese ESL student with a degree in economics was now learning English “from ABC, like a kid.”

Nevertheless, some of my students found areas of disagreement. One was taken aback by the ESL student’s outrage at the book, *Satanic Verses*, by Salman Rushdie: “I am not about to condemn anyone to death because of what they write.” Another was “amazed at what we had in common, but I was sad to see all that we would never agree on. Yet, for better or worse, I met a new person.”

### **Closing the Gap — an Ongoing Conversation**

These insights about the “old,” the past, and the “other” were gained from one-on-one human contact. They are the residue of real conversations between human beings. Eating *pad thai* at the cultural food fest, listening to ethnic music, watching the dancers on the platform — these are also important, and they are fun — but for developing understanding, empathy, and sometimes even friendship, they are the equivalent of sound bites. Such activities are still essentially theater with the inevitable separation between of performer and audience. They may celebrate the culture, but we must take the leap toward celebrating the individual. “Talk is cheap” takes on a positive connotation when “talk” becomes real conversation.

What next? Bunker Hill Community College could inaugurate its own landmark oral history project, an ongoing conversation over the years, covering all our students, perhaps even all our faculty and staff. The unique feature of such a project is that it would be a two-way process wherein each interviewer is also an interviewee. In addition to getting us from “I” to “Thou,” such a project conducted by an urban community college could provide some valuable material for research into how human attitudes in densely diversified college settings can change.

And finally, my professional triumph. My student Mike, after concluding the interviews with Nina, a Russian émigré, invited her to continue the conversation at a local restaurant for dinner:

*We talked or, I guess, I talked more and found that we had much in common. This Russian girl was really cool! We went back to my place and started talking about her present day living situation. It seems she lived with two junkies who took all their frustrations and problems out on her. We drove to her apartment and picked up her belongings. She’s been living with me ever since. Thank you, Professor Umansky.*

### **Assignment A**

#### **“I” and “Thou”: Getting to Know Someone from an Earlier Time**

When you have completed this module, you will have:

- become familiar with some key interviewing techniques,

- effectively used these techniques,
- used the information and insights garnered during the interview to form a thesis and write a profile (approximately 750 words) of an “older” friend,
- shared an interesting experience with an older person and had a good time.

An interview is not necessarily a formal event, but covers any situation where the reporter talks with someone face to face to obtain information. An interview can range from a conversation with a local official about a meeting to a formal questioning of the President of the United States. The interview you are about to conduct is more intimate and, for you, more significant. You are being permitted into the life of another human being, and in learning about that other person, you may be learning something about yourself.

### **Step 1: The Interview**

Have a long conversation of at least two hours (more than one conversation would be even better) with someone who is at least sixty years old. This person may be a parent, a grandparent, a relative, a friend of the family, a neighbor. It is important that you take some notes during or after each conversation, not only to help you remember, but also to record some direct quotes which you can include in your paper. Some students have tape recorded these interviews so that they can keep the voice as well as the thoughts of the interviewee. Do not, however, use a tape recorder or take notes in the presence of your subject unless you have first asked permission.

Allow your conversation(s) to be leisurely. Allowing a lot of time for the conversation achieves rapport because it shows your respect for your subject. Observe facial reactions and body language. Some of your questions will lead you along interesting paths, toward a real exchange of personal history, memories, attitudes, and even a good deal of social history. Of course, the questions must be tailored to the person you are interviewing.

You may have already developed some questions of your own, but here are a few additional questions which may open up a meaningful conversation:

- What is it like to find yourself at the age of sixty (or seventy, or eighty)?
- Describe your birthplace. Why did you leave?
- What were your expectations upon coming from another country (or another city or neighborhood) to the United States (or to Boston)?
- Were these expectations fulfilled?
- Describe your childhood. Your neighborhood. What games did children play?
- Describe your school. Do you remember any teachers?
- What did you dream of becoming when you were young? What did you ultimately do?
- Did you go to college? To work? Describe your early working conditions. Your salary and benefits? Did you belong to a union? Did you ever go out on strike?
- What do you remember of the Depression? The CCC? The WPA?
- What did you do for relaxation or entertainment when you were in your teens and early twenties?
- Do you still have friends from those years?

- Describe the kitchen in your house. The bathroom. Did you have a refrigerator or an ice-box? An individual telephone or a party line?
- Tell me about your parents. What were they like? What did they do for a living? Did you have disagreements with them? About what?
- What do you remember of World War II (or the Korean War)? Were you drafted?
- Who was your favorite president? Why?
- Do you think life is better (or worse) now than when you were in your twenties? Why? In what way?
- What do you think of your children? Did they turn out the way you had envisioned?
- What do you think of the younger generation today?
- What is the most important change that has come about in your lifetime?
- What family stories or traditions are important to you?
- Have you ever experienced any form of prejudice?
- What are your regrets? Your blessings?

### **Step 2: Writing the Profile**

After you have completed your conversations, you will have to draw some conclusions from the many concrete details that you have gathered about your friend's life and attitudes. Then you will have to develop a thesis. Is there some theme, characteristic, outlook or situation which has shaped this person's life?

Although this profile is based on an oral interview, it is not to be written as a series of questions and answers. You, as the writer, must evaluate the material, decide what is significant, and control the shape of the written profile. By all means, include direct quotes, but treat this as a unified, coherent and fully developed profile of a "friend." The profile should contain between five to seven paragraphs. Submit the draft for checking before writing the final version.

Finally, please note that this assignment is entitled "I and Thou." This phrase, coined by the philosopher Martin Buber is "I" and "thou," not "I" and "it." An "it" is a thing, but a "thou" is a person. This gloriously simple phrase, then, implies that "I" and "thou" respect each other's equality, dignity, mystery and humanness.

Good luck, and enjoy this adventure in communication!

### **Assignment B**

#### **"I" and "Thou": Getting to Know Someone from Another Culture**

When you have completed this module, you will have had several conversations with a BHCC student from another culture, a student whose native language is different from your own. Based on these conversations, you will write a profile comparing and contrasting the life of your new friend with your own.

The following questions may help you get started.

- How long have you been in the United States?
- What part of the world are you from? City? Rural area?  
How was your city or town different from where you now live?
- What are you studying at BHCC? What do you hope to do or be ten years from now?

- Besides going to BHCC, do you work? What do you do? Do you like it?
- What did you do in your own country? Work? Go to school?  
(If “work”: What did you work at? Did it require any training?  
How much did you earn? How many hours a week did you work?  
How old were you when you started? Did you enjoy your work?  
What were your working conditions?)  
(If “school”: What did you study? How large was your school?  
How was the education different from that in the United States?  
Did you plan to go to college?)
- Why did you leave your country? Was it hard to leave? Did you leave family behind? How do you feel about that? Do you have any hopes of seeing them again?
- Tell me about your way of life in your country. What did you do for entertainment? Sports? How different were these activities from American leisure-time activities?
- Describe your new living style in the United States. Do you live alone or with your family or friends? Do you eat the same food or has your diet changed?
- What language do you speak at home or with your friends? Do you speak English with any of your friends?
- Have you made friends with any Americans? How do Americans differ from your countrymen and women? Do they behave differently? Think differently?
- What do you like about living in the United States? What do you dislike?

If you have any interesting questions of your own, do add them to this list. And remember, you will be asked questions, too. Good luck, and have an interesting conversation!

### **Assignment C**

#### **“I” and “Thou”: Getting to Know an American**

One way to learn about American culture is to conduct interviews with American people in which you include questions on controversial topics. The answers you get will not only give you a view of this society’s values, but they will also tell you something about your own values. The following questions are only suggestions. Be sure to add your own interesting questions.

- What is your name? How do you spell it?
- What city are you from? Where are your grandparents from? Where are your great-grandparents from?
- How many people are there in your family? Are you married? Do you have children?
- Are you working now? Where? Do you like your job? Why or why not?
- What do you enjoy doing in your free time? What are your hobbies?
- Do you like Bunker Hill Community College? What courses are you taking now? What is your major?

- What will you do when you finish BHCC?
- What kind of music do you like?
- What kind of books do you like to read?
- What kind of sports do you like?
- What kind of food do you like? Do you ever eat food from other countries? What kind?
- How much TV do you watch? What are your favorite programs?
- Do you have any foreign friends? Do you think Americans like foreigners? Why or why not? Do you speak other languages? Which ones?
- Have you ever traveled to another countries? Which ones?
- If you won the lottery and you could take a trip anywhere, where would you go? Why?
- When you were a child, were your parents very strict? Did they give you a lot of rules to follow? Do you think this is good?
- What do you hope to be ten years from now?
- What do you know about my native country?
- In your opinion, what are some of the problems facing America today?
- How can we solve these problems?

Have an enjoyable conversation!