Creating multicultural classrooms
Texas State’s successful program goes to South Africa

by Ann Friou

In 2004, Texas State began an ambitious program to transform courses to include multicultural content and strategies for teaching students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Called the Multicultural Curriculum Transformation Project, its goal is to transform at least two courses per year in each college by 2009. The program has already achieved great success, and its success has caught the attention of other universities in the U.S. and abroad.

One of those universities, Tshwane University of Technology in South Africa, invited the program’s director, theatre associate professor Sandra Mayo, to showcase Texas State’s program in July to the fine arts faculty on Tshwane’s Johannesburg campus. Tshwane’s 60,000-student population reflects South Africa’s cultural diversity. Like the United States, the Republic of South Africa is an ethnically diverse
nation with a history of racial segregation: Apartheid, the institution of legal segregation, was abolished in 1990 after a long and sometimes violent struggle. Today, South Africa has the largest white, Indian and racially-mixed communities in Africa. Black South Africans, who speak nine officially recognized languages and many more dialects, comprise about 80 percent of the population.

Consequently, Mayo suspected that problems of integration and respect for cultural diversity might present a challenge for Tshwane’s faculty and students. Happily, she found that many of the faculty are using teaching strategies that consider students’ diverse backgrounds — for instance, a theater professor is adapting plays by Western European writers to include native South African characters, dialects and rituals.

“As the workshop progressed, I saw excitement in their eyes,” Mayo said. “Many of them realized that they are already implementing certain multicultural practices.”

Mayo suggested several strategies to the faculty for enhancing their multicultural efforts, among them to:

- Be aware of different cultural perspectives and ways of knowing and doing.
- Give students opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge in a variety of ways.
- Challenge students to think critically from their own perspective, synthesizing with knowledge of other views.
- Enhance student awareness of issues related to the construction of knowledge.
- Vary teaching strategies between the “sage on the stage” and the “guide on the side” activities.
- Consider students’ different learning styles. Assign projects that require creative, analytical and/or problem-solving abilities with occasional options for choice.
- Take into account gender issues and all the ways we are culturally different whenever possible or productive.
- Enhance student awareness of global issues through examples, comparisons and projects designed around them.
- Encourage all students to think by asking them to write (three-minute quick write) before discussion begins.

Mayo also led an exciting discussion about embracing “self” in a multicultural sense.

“Multiculturalism is about who we are individually and collectively. Many black South African students have become divorced from their indigenous cultures. They need to learn more about their root culture in order to embrace and affirm self. It doesn’t make sense to go to a university to educate yourself about other people, affirming them, and lose yourself, or devalue the significance of your own culture, in the process.

“Also, we need to have culturally-competent teachers who can help students to learn through their own cultural lens, so that they will be more excited about learning.” Mayo said. As when she conducts the workshop at Texas State, she gave the Tshwane faculty a set of questions to ask themselves about who they are culturally. For example, how does your culture influence what you do in the classroom — the questions you ask students, the examples you use to illustrate points? Are you teaching everything from the way you see the world, how you process information? Are you taking into consideration who your students are, how they learn, what they value?

“I often find that people enjoy enhancing their understanding of how they process — communication styles, especially conflict resolution styles,” Mayo said. “The point is not necessarily to change how you think but to be aware of how you think, so that you can adjust if or when needed to maximize effectiveness.”

Mayo also spoke to Tshwane theatre students about African-American theatre — performance history, intellectual thought and aesthetics. When asked by a student, she talked about her personal experiences as an African-American and her embracing of Africa as her mother country, land of her ancestry.

“Another student asked how I could know Africa since I’m not African. I loved the question! I answered that, although I did not grow up in Africa, I have read about Africa and traveled there. A sense of Africa has been very important in the African-American aesthetic of the last 20-30 years — a sense of what we call race memory or blood memory. The African experience is not lost,” Mayo said. “It is still here; it just survives in America in different clothing. The students understood what I said, and I hope my story will inspire them to embrace their own stories of self. Who we are individually and collectively is the whole story of multiculturalism.”

The illustration is by Nicky De Lacy, age 9, from an environmental art contest conducted in East London, South Africa. The Mitte Honors Program hosted an exhibit and sale of some 500 original drawings by children with proceeds going back to East London to help buy a water pump for the community.