THE MISSION OF THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR URBAN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT is to partner with Regional Resource Centers to develop powerful networks of urban local education agencies and schools that embrace and implement a data-based, continuous improvement approach for inclusive practices. Embedded within this approach is a commitment to evidence-based practice in early intervention, universal design, literacy and positive behavior supports.

The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), of the U.S. Department of Education, has funded NIUSI to facilitate the unification of current general and special education reform efforts as these are implemented in the nation’s urban school districts. NIUSI’s creation reflects OSEP’s long-standing commitment to improving educational outcomes for all children, specifically those with disabilities, in communities challenged and enriched by the urban experience.
Skilled Dialogue©:
Guidelines & Strategic Questions for Ensuring Respectful, Reciprocal and Responsive Assessment and Instruction for Students who are Culturally/Linguistically Diverse¹

Isaura Barrera, University of New Mexico
Lucinda Kramer, National University

October 2005

SKILLED DIALOGUE® AND CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PRACTICES

Skilled Dialogue® is a relational approach to communication and interactions that stems from the evidence-based premise that three qualities characterize cultural competence: respect, reciprocity, and responsiveness. These three qualities along with the component skills that promote and sustain them (see Figure 1) define the nature of Skilled Dialogue®. When integrated, the qualities and skills generate a framework of guidelines and strategic questions that help ensure culturally competent assessment and instruction of culturally and linguistically diverse students. This OnPoint first describes Skilled Dialogue’s® qualities and skills. Readers are then introduced to the guidelines and strategic questions.

WHAT QUALITIES CHARACTERIZE SKILLED DIALOGUE®?

Within the Skilled Dialogue® approach, the absence or presence of three qualities—respect, reciprocity, and responsiveness—is considered key to determining whether interactions are culturally and linguistically skilled. These qualities, first identified through structured observations of highly culturally competent practitioners, comprise the core of Skilled Dialogue®. The first quality, respect, addresses the need to honor identity, no matter how diverse from our own. The second quality, reciprocity, focuses on the need to honor voice, even when in disagreement with our own; and the third, responsiveness, on the need to honor connectedness, even across seeming contradictions and polarities.

RESPECT Respect is the hallmark quality of Skilled Dialogue®. The chief dynamic that underscores respect is the recognition of the boundaries that define individuals’ identities. Boundaries are identity markers that both connect and distinguish us from others. They identify the parameters of the spaces that we choose to occupy. The boundaries that we hold, whether cognitive, physical, emotional or spiritual, reflect our basic assumptions.
about others, the world around us, and ourselves. These assumptions define the meanings that we attach to our actions and our words, as well as to the actions and words of others. This latter fact makes honoring identity a critical part of culturally respectful assessment and instruction.

When we interact with students, whether to assess or to instruct, we are in dialogue with them; that is, we are transmitting and exchanging meaning across the boundaries of their identities and our own. There are a number of different types of boundaries with significant implications for appropriate assessment and instruction. The language(s) we speak, for example, delineate both linguistic and cognitive boundaries. Ability levels are another type of boundary, one that marks the territory within which students function in particular areas. Our emotional boundaries, still another type of boundary, determine the degree to which we do, or do not, choose to bestow sufficient respect on others to share information and beliefs with them. Cognitive boundaries shape the concepts and ideas that are most meaningful and comprehensible to us. And finally, spiritual boundaries give us “wings” of motivation and a larger sense of meaning even as we struggle to learn to read, for example.

Both assessment and instruction are concerned with boundaries. Assessment, by definition, is an attempt to trace the boundaries within which students are functioning. Assessment data delineate the “edges” of students’ abilities and disabilities as determined by reference to particular standards and/or benchmarks. Similarly, instruction also addresses boundaries, though its effort is to strengthen, expand and/or enrich those boundaries rather than to merely identify them. It is the task of instruction to meet students at the edges of their abilities/knowledge (i.e., zones of proximal development) and lead them beyond them into new territory.

When the boundaries (i.e., abilities and limitations) that define a student’s identity as a person and learner are acknowledged (i.e., honored) assessment and instructional interactions yield optimum outcomes because they are properly “aimed.” Both presentation and response formats will be within students’ zones of current, or proximal development (i.e., within their reach). Because of this “fit,” behaviors and requests can consequently be more accurately understood and more easily complied with.

The discussions on guidelines and strategic questions will say more about how to identify and honor boundaries in such concrete and practical ways during assessment and instruction.

**RECIROCITY** Reciprocity, a second quality that characterizes Skilled Dialogue©, builds on respect. Once identity is acknowledged, it needs to find expression. Reciprocity honors this expression (i.e., voice) by promoting a balance of power between persons in dialogue. At its core is the recognition that each person in an interaction is equally capable—even

---

1Cummins (2000)
when one is a teacher and the other a student. To understand reciprocity in this sense, however, is to distinguish the common understanding of power as expertise and authority from the less common understanding of power as capacity or capability. This understanding is reflected in the Spanish word “poder,” which is used both as a noun meaning “power” and a verb meaning “to be able,” as in “yo puedo” (“I can”).

What reciprocity requires is validating the experiences and perceptions of every person in an interaction as being of equal value to that interaction. Reciprocity does not, however, require denying that one person has more expertise or knowledge than another in particular areas or that one person may have more institutionalized authority (e.g., a social worker with the authority to remove children from their home). Teachers, for example, certainly have more expertise and knowledge about academic settings and requirements than do their students. Students, on the other hand, have more expertise and knowledge about their own experiences and capabilities. Both sets of expertise and knowledge are essential to optimal assessment and instruction.

Reciprocal interactions create equal opportunities to contribute and make choices. A key aspect of reciprocity is the recognition that one point of view (e.g., the teacher’s) need not dominate or exclude a diverse point of view (e.g., the student’s). Rather, both points of view complement each other. A second key aspect is the consequent support of free choice over forced “either-or” choice that emerges from that first recognition. From a reciprocal perspective, assessment and instruction are collaborative activities where all involved parties need to be both teacher and learner.

Entering into interactions only as teacher/expert — whether relative to knowledge, support, direction or something else — with no acknowledgement of what one can learn, inhibits not only the data that we might obtain, it also inhibits the full potential of what we seek to learn in the first place. When interactions are not reciprocal, for example, students are less willing to offer responses or to attempt tasks—and thus, give less than an optimum picture of their skills and needs. Similarly, students may be less willing to participate in classroom discussions and reveal what they know, or don’t know. Assessment and instruction that have reciprocal contexts actively encourage students to share their voice and thus more fully enter into the process of giving and receiving information. When students’ perceptions are that their input is valued in and of itself, not just as a means to meet practitioners’ needs or goals, they will be more willing to provide it. More will be said about this as the Skilled Dialogue® guidelines and strategic questions are discussed.

**RESPONSIVENESS** If respect is about recognizing different boundaries, and reciprocity is about acknowledging that every person has something of value to contribute, then responsiveness is about engaging the
power of the uniqueness that respect acknowledges and reciprocity uncovers. Being responsive “requires...an openness to allowing [others] to uncover who they are rather than shaping them into who we want or need them to be.”\(^3\) It requires moving from autopilot reactions (e.g., “This worked in the past” or “This is what is recommended for students like this”) to mindful responses that emerge out of the recognition that “Where we are is where we’ve never been.”\(^4\)

Ultimately, responsiveness is about honoring connectedness—that aspect of interactions that arises not solely from one party or another, but from the synergy between the two. Responsiveness seeks to find the points of connection between diverse perspectives by becoming mindful—attentive, curious, empathic—about how someone else experiences the world and how that experience connects with our own. It involves finding ways to perceive students’ existing skills and knowledge, not as separate from, but as a foundation and springboard for acquiring new or different skills and knowledge.

The qualities of respect, reciprocity and responsiveness work in concert. Respect invites us to seek out the “facts” that compose others’ identities and thus honor differences. Reciprocity allows us to tap into and validate the meanings associated with those facts. Responsiveness allows us to leverage those skills and knowledge in the service of building additional ones. Figure 4, at the end of this OnPoint, illustrates how these qualities can inform assessment and instruction in light of the skills, guidelines and strategic questions associated with them in the Skilled Dialogue\(^\circ\) approach.

**HOW CAN RESPECT, RECIPROCITY AND RESPONSIVENESS BE PROMOTED AND SUSTAINED?**

Respect, reciprocity and responsiveness, the three qualities that characterize Skilled Dialogue\(^\circ\), are promoted and sustained through two component skills. The first of these skills—**Anchored Understanding of Diversity**—addresses the need to move from general, abstract knowledge about culture and cultural diversity to concrete experiential knowledge of individual students and families. Such Anchored Understanding moves practitioners from general statements and beliefs such as “I know that American Indians don’t put the same value on being verbal as we do here in school” to more personalized statements and beliefs such as “Tommy isn’t very verbal but I haven’t know him very long. I need to get more information from his family to determine what might be going on.” Anchored Understanding of Diversity, thus, ensures respect and, sometimes, even reciprocity. By itself, however, it is insufficient to establish true responsiveness. For that, **3rd Space**—the second skill—is necessary. 3rd Space complements and extends

---

\(^3\) Freedman & Coombs, 1996

\(^4\) Langer, 2005, p. 12
Anchored Understanding by unveiling and optimizing the essential connectedness of all perspectives. The skill of 3rd Space is most essential in the face of apparent contradictions (e.g., this student’s family and cultural context really does value nonverbal communication over verbal communication, but the school context is highly biased toward verbal communication skills). 3rd Space would, in such a situation, focus on the co-construction of options within which complementary aspects of the contradiction can be accessed and integrated by asking such questions as “What role can nonverbal skills play in becoming verbally proficient?” More is said on this below.

**ANCHORED UNDERSTANDING OF DIVERSITY** Anchored Understanding of Diversity refers to an understanding of differences that is “anchored” experientially, in face-to-face and hands-on experiences that move us from “knowing about” to truly “knowing,” and cognitively, through the belief that all behaviors have a positive intent (i.e. that others’ behaviors make as much sense as our own).

It is possible to know about a student, for example, without ever having met that student. We may know the levels at which he can read and compute mathematical problems; we may know that he has repeated the second grade and that he was referred to but did not qualify for special education; and so on. Such knowing, however, remains “unanchored” until we anchor it experientially, by actually meet and getting to know the student face-to-face, and cognitively, by understanding the social and cultural context within which these “facts” are embedded and “make sense” (i.e., have meanings that may be quite different that the meanings we would assign to them). Only when our understanding of differences is thus anchored experientially and cognitively can we obtain accurate information about the abilities and needs of particular students and families and develop optimal responses to these abilities and needs.

More will be said in the following sections of this OnPoint about how to anchor our knowledge so as to create and implement skilled assessment and instruction. Before we can anchor our understanding of culturally based differences, however, we first need to understand what culture is and how it functions. The study of culture is an extensive area in itself and a detailed discussion is outside the purpose and scope of this article. The following points provide only a very brief overview. Readers are referred to Barrera, Corso & Macpherson (2003) as well as to the references at the end of this OnPoint for greater detail.

**DEFINING CULTURE** Cultures are mental models or paradigms developed by communities over time to make sense of their physical, emotional, and social environments as well as to guide them in how best to operate within those environments. Culture, a pervasive and dynamic process that influences
every aspect of how we perceive and interact with others, includes the beliefs, language(s), and behaviors valued in a community (e.g., roles and rules for interacting with strangers). There are multiple and equally valid models or cultures, just as there are multiple and equally valid languages. Additionally, just as a language is more than just the sounds and words produced, a culture is more than just observable behaviors, beliefs, or values. Each visible aspect of culture (e.g., foods, behaviors) reflects and stems from a deeper, less visible aspect of the communities worldview. For example, respect for elders—a valued aspect of interpersonal behavior in some cultures—is a manifestation of a deeper worldview that understands personal experience, rather than written text, as the definitive source of knowledge and wisdom.

It is important to remember that there are levels of culture as well as levels of participation in cultures. Cultural identity is not a simple “this or that” phenomenon. Everyone participates in one or more cultures to a greater or lesser degree. In fact, “many millions of people have their roots in two or more distinct cultures.” In addition, we do not participate equally or completely in all the cultures with which we identify. The term Hispanic culture, for example, refers to an overarching cluster of beliefs, values, practices, and language. Individuals participate in this culture to varying degrees depending on a number of factors (e.g., family history, personal experience). Compounding this participation is a simultaneous participation in one or more additional cultures (e.g., EuroAmerican Normative Culture (ENC), American Indian culture). Individuals and communities reflect but do not ever completely define a macro culture, which, like any other general conceptual category (e.g., maleness, tree-ness), can only exist at a general level.

Cultures function to connect groups as well as to distinguish them. One of the functions of culture is to maintain the coherence of groups (with survival as a guiding goal). Cultures thus set parameters that connect people. These very same parameters also unavoidably distinguish one community from another. Speaking Spanish, for example, distinguishes persons who participate in Hispanic culture from those who do not. It also serves to connect persons who speak Spanish with each other. Like a combined centripetal and centrifugal force, culture acts to keep the necessary balance between connection and separation.

All behavior, and by inference all assessment and instruction, is embedded in and shaped by culture. All children are, for example, socialized into the language, roles, and rules valued in their home as a means of providing them with the tools for becoming successful participants in their family and

---

6 Barrera, Corso and Macpherson (2003) use this term to refer to the institutionalized cultural norms against which cultural linguistic diversity is defined. It is a term chosen over more common terms such as “White” or “European” in order to highlight the fact that it refers to institutionalized cultural norms rather than to the personalized cultural framework of particular individuals.
transmitted from one generation to another, implicitly through modeling, as well as explicitly through verbal messages such as: “This is good.” “This is not good.” This process is called enculturation. The process of acculturation (i.e., learning a second culture) is initiated when a second set of expectations, values, beliefs, and/or language are encountered.

**DIMENSIONS OF CULTURE** There is a spectrum of ways in which the phenomenon of culture expresses itself within specific human communities. Three dimensions of this spectrum are particularly meaningful for anchoring our understanding of this spectrum: sense of self, funds of knowledge, and perceptions of power. Diversity within these three dimensions tends to be at the heart of miscommunication and unskilled interactions, with critical implications for both assessment and instruction.

**Sense of Self** The dimension refers both to who we believe ourselves to be and to the construct of self itself. A clear and consistent message of cross-cultural researchers is that self is a construct largely dependent on the beliefs and values of social and cultural contexts. “The basic, unconscious assumption of Western culture is that there is an unequivocal, irrevocable distinction between that which is the self on the one hand, and that which is nonself on the other. …the self is represented as existing free of any and all contexts: The self is here; the context is there. …The cultures of many American minorities [on the other hand] do not begin and end their dictionary entry for ‘self’ with a self vs. nonself distinction. Rather, to the extent that one is or has a self at all, this self is seen as constituted by social interactions, contexts, and relationships.” The boundaries that define a self, therefore, are both different and constructed differently across cultures.

The implications of this reality for assessing and teaching students with behavioral issues, for example, are significant. Students who are culturally diverse and have ‘behavioral issues’ in the school context may or may not have ‘behavioral issues’ in the context of their family or their community. The educator needs to ask the key question, “Is it possible cultural diversity is playing a role in my understanding of this student’s behavior? “Cultural diversity exists in the interactions and comparisons between persons rather than in the characteristics of a single person. It is present when there is “the probability that, in interaction with a particular child or family, the [practitioner] might attribute different meanings or values to behaviors or events than would the family and someone from that family’s environment.”

Individuals develops their sense of self—that is, learns who they are and how they are to interact with others—within the context of family. For this reason, questions such as the following are important in determining how best to assess and/or teach a student.

\[\text{Landrine} (1995), \text{pp. 746-747}\]
\[\text{Barrera, 1996, p. 71}\]
Does the student’s family emphasize interdependence or independence? Does approval of family and community supersede school authority? Is the student’s and family’s understanding of self focused on achieving autonomous self-sufficiency or on life-long family dependency and approval? What role does gender play in administering family discipline? What expectations does the student have of females providing nurturing guidance or of explicit redirection? In some cultures male children have very little discipline until the age of ten or twelve when the father assumes a stern role as the child begins to take on adult responsibilities.

As educators we must have an understanding of the cultural dimensions underlying a student’s sense of self and how it impacts their behavior. By identifying how a student or family understands autonomy and to what degree group interaction and cooperation are valued we can begin to develop behavioral interventions that are culturally responsive and effective.

**Funds of Knowledge** Funds of knowledge—the second cultural dimension recognized within Skilled Dialogue⁹—refers to the pool of beliefs, values and other knowledge that informs a family’s template for promoting development and learning. Funds of knowledge are a construct somewhat analogous to “cultural capital,” which refers to the depth and breadth of funds of knowledge to which one has access. Moll and Greenberg (1990) defined funds of knowledge more specifically as an “operations manual of essential information and strategies households need to maintain their well-being.”¹⁰ These “operations manuals” or “strategic bodies of essential information” are contained within and transmitted through a community’s culture. Some might even say that culture is composed of just such a set of funds of knowledge transmitted across generations. Since both assessment and instruction draw their content from designated funds of knowledge, differences in these funds across cultures can dramatically impact students’ performance.

An individual’s funds of knowledge include the language(s) they speak, the degree to which they value verbal and nonverbal communication, and the degree to which they value oral and written literacy. Funds of knowledge include information on social rules and roles, appropriate and inappropriate behavior, and degree of importance given to the individual as compared to the community. These funds also encompass one’s values and beliefs about learning; best ways to teach and learn, best ways to problem solve and make decisions, how the world works, and one’s worldview.

Educators therefore need to appreciate and respond to the differing funds of knowledge students bring to the classroom. They must assess the degree to which a particular student’s funds of knowledge, and the types of knowledge

---

⁹Lubeck, 1994

¹⁰p. 323.
valued within these funds, align with chosen assessment measures and curriculum. A key instructional challenge is to take the richness of the funds of knowledge students bring to the school setting and create connections that support successful mastery of the curriculum.

By considering a student’s funds of knowledge educators can make informed decisions about how best to select assessments, methods of instruction and strategies for optimum acquisition and demonstration of learning. Questions such as the following can be helpful: To what degree are students’ funds of knowledge demonstrated orally in your classroom? To what degree are they contained in written materials? To what degree are learning/teaching strategies used in the home explicit, implicit or direct, or indirect? What is a student’s preferred strategy for acquiring new knowledge (e.g., questioning, trial and error, modeling) and demonstrating new knowledge?

It is essential that educators examine their assessment, instruction, and communications for the degree of compatibility with a student’s funds of knowledge. Students who are culturally and linguistically diverse are placed at risk for academic problems and school failure if disparity in funds of knowledge is ignored. Bridges must be built connecting the funds of knowledge students bring to school and the new knowledge required to succeed academically and in future learning environments.

Perceptions of Power Finally, perceptions of power form a third cultural dimension addressed by Skilled Dialogue©. Power, of course, is itself a specific concept that holds different meanings across cultures. In some cultures, for example, power derives from social networks; in others, the quantity or quality of possessions confers differing degrees of power. Additionally, diversity is a comparative term that is referenced to a normative group, typically a group perceived as holding social and/or economic power. By definition, therefore, experiences of powerlessness tend to be more common in groups designated as diverse.

Teachers can communicate positive perceptions of culturally and linguistically diverse students’ power in multiple ways. One such way is to acknowledge a student’s first language through its integration into instruction. Asking students how to say a word or phrase in their language, or using two or more languages on bulletin boards are examples of such integration. Similarly, collecting materials in a student’s native language and encouraging students to use their first language when working with same language peers can increase students’ perceptions of their own academic and intellectual power. While teachers cannot learn every language in their classroom, they can learn a few words. The goal is to acknowledge and value students’ language and identity. By using a few words of a student’s language, by accessing materials in their native language, you are communicating positive perceptions that their language is important and their diversity valued.
We also contribute to disempowerment and school failure of a student who is culturally and linguistically diverse when we neglect to recognize or accommodate culturally determined preferences for thinking and interacting. Effective classroom instruction recognizes and accommodates a student’s culturally preferred learning style. Research reports learning and achievement increased when a student’s learning style is incorporated into a teacher’s teaching style. Knowledge of culturally preferred learning styles and student demonstration of knowledge will assist you developing a repertoire of teaching strategies that encourages high expectations of all students.

3RD SPACE  3rd Space — the second skill that promotes and sustains the three characteristics of Skilled Dialogue © — focuses on creatively reframing into paradoxes the contradictions encountered as diverse cultures come into contact with each other. Unlike ENC, which commonly polarizes reality into either-or dichotomies, 3rd Space promotes the holding of two or more divergent and even seemingly contradictory views in one’s mind at the same time, without forcing a choice between them. This 3rd Space perspective invites practitioners to shift from a dualistic and exclusive perception of reality to an integrative inclusive perspective that focuses on the complementary aspects of diverse values, behaviors, and beliefs.

The basic premise of 3rd Space is that differences can be integrated into a greater whole without needing to be changed. Two simple examples may clarify this. The first is a visual one: the color green, which is the result of integrating blue and yellow without changing either one. A second example is musical: a chord, wherein multiple notes are integrated into a single sound, without changing their own distinctive characteristics. Such integration results in what Cummins terms “additive” choices (e.g., bilingualism), rather than what he terms “subtractive” choices (e.g., English only). Thus, desired ends can be reached without doing violence to what already is.

3rd Space prompts assessors to distinguish assessment for the purpose of measuring English proficiency from assessment intended to measure overall language proficiency. It encourages analysis of the strengths of existing behaviors/skills rather than unthinking presentation of tasks that privilege only certain behaviors/skills and overlook all others. In relation to instruction, 3rd Space invites teachers to leverage existing behaviors/skills; i.e., to use them as a springboard to other behaviors/skills. An example of this would be the use of environmental “literacy” (e.g., the ability to read the sky to tell if it will rain) as a door into text literacy. The broad definition of literacy as a process beyond just text reading provides an inclusive “space” within which an undeveloped type of reading can be linked to an already developed one. The following section speaks in more detail to how both 3rd Space and Anchored Understanding of Diversity can lead to the development of strategies such as these.

11Cummins (1984)
What guidelines does Skilled Dialogue© offer to help us craft respectful, reciprocal and responsive assessment and instruction?

Skilled Dialogue© defines culturally competent assessment and instruction as assessment and instruction characterized by the qualities of respect, reciprocity and responsiveness. These three characteristics ensure that the need to honor identity, voice, and connection are addressed optimally. When these three characteristics are examined in light of Skilled Dialogue’s© two skills—Anchored Understanding of Diversity and 3rd Space—six guidelines emerge to serve as a framework for the development of culturally competent assessment and instruction (see Figure 2 above). These guidelines, in turn, are the source of the strategic questions discussed in the following section.

**HONORING IDENTITY** The first two guidelines shown in Figure 2 are directed...
toward ensuring respect through the dynamic of boundary recognition: one by anchoring our understanding of our own and others’ identities in specific experiential contexts; the other, by reminding us to avoid polarizing those identities into irreconcilable “us-them,” this way right-that way wrong” categories.

The skill of Anchored Understanding of Diversity (AUD) brings the recognition that there is a wide range of ways in which communities, and the individuals within them, perceive and structure their identities. For some, ethnic affiliation is a critical part of their identities; for others, it might be social class or level of education. When asked “What defines who you are?” each of us will respond in distinct ways. The guideline associated with AUD addresses this aspect of diversity by directing us to learn through direct interactions the variety of ways in which the individuals with whom we are interacting perceive and structure their identities.

Some of the concrete outcomes of recognizing diverse boundaries in this anchored, relational fashion can include the following: recognizing that the use of a language other than English is not only a primary means of communication for this student, but also a part of his sense of self; recognizing that this student does not perceive desired behaviors as we do, but rather holds distinct interpretations and values about them; understanding that this student’s self-image and self-understanding is rooted in a collectivistic world view rather than an individualistic one.

The second, closely related guideline emerges as the skill of 3rd Space is applied to our anchored understandings. It advocates that, as we encounter beliefs and behaviors that are seemingly contradictory to our own, we suspend judgment and stay with the resulting tension. The willingness to suspend judgment and stay with the tension gives concrete expression to our respect for boundaries diverse from our own. We cannot respect what we immediately rush to change.

HONORING VOICE  The next two guidelines shown in figure 2 are directed toward establishing reciprocity (i.e., the honoring of voice). Their focus, therefore, is on valuing the distinct identities uncovered as respect is established and sustained.

The first of these two guidelines encourages us to act on our recognition of multiple voices or “stories” by creating safe times and places for them to be told. Once we have recognized students’ boundaries, it is invaluable to allow time to discover the “story” that draws and gives significance to those boundaries. For example, does assessment—and being on time for that assessment—carry the same positive meaning and value for this student or family that it carries for us as teachers or administrators? All too often, past stories of inappropriate placement and discrimination provide a context that generates an entirely different meaning. Without understanding the pain and shame of such stories, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to establish and sustain reciprocity, which is so essential to cooperative problem-solving.
Simply allowing someone to talk, however, does not in and of itself honor voice. For voice to be honored it must also be validated (i.e., acknowledged as making sense within its context). The second guideline in this set thus addresses the need to authentically validate perspectives. Such validation need not accept or approve. It needs only to say “I see. That makes sense to me now.” It must increase trust in others’ capacities and skills and negate the need to defend, which so often sabotages desired goals. As long as we communicate, however subtly, that we are more capable, more intelligent or somehow better, reciprocity cannot be established and the “problem,” whatever it is, remains more ours than theirs.

Establishing reciprocity in this way requires both listening and coming to the realization that continuing (or not acquiring) a behavior makes sense (i.e., “works”) within a particular context. Not speaking English or not following the behavioral mores expected in one context, for example, makes sense within another context (e.g., it may work to maintain an essential identity in that context). 3rd Space skills help practitioners answer this challenge of diverse values, mores and expectations. It does so, not by compromising one set of goals or beliefs, but rather by establishing mutual relationships that honor connection across diverse goals and beliefs, as discussed below.

**HONORING CONNECTION** Finally, the last two guidelines shown in Figure 2 addresses responsiveness. They focus on honoring connections across diverse contexts by identifying and mining the riches of those contexts in ways that yield options or “sums” greater than their “parts.”

The first of these guidelines honors connection by inviting us to approach interactions with deep empathy, attention, wonder and curiosity, rather than on autopilot. It asks practitioners to acknowledge that, somewhere in others’ stories, are shared realities, points that connect stories in some way. How, for example, does a student’s noncompliance connect with our own story? What aspect of our own reality mirrors that noncompliance? Are we, in fact, modeling the very noncompliance toward the student that we are striving to reduce/eliminate? A bumper sticker seen recently makes this point quite graphically “Why do we kill people to teach that we mustn’t kill?” Realities can also be subtly shared in other ways. Do we, for example, fail to see a student’s giftedness because we fail to see or value our own? Do we perhaps rush to change a behavior because we associate it too closely with past experiences instead of looking for how it is unique in its own right? Only when hard questions such as these are answered can we begin to craft assessment and instruction that are truly responsive to students’ and families’ needs and gifts. The final guideline focuses on the creation of greater and more inclusive options that mine

---

12 This should in no way be interpreted to mean that we should “comply” with students’ inappropriate behaviors. It does however, mean that we need to seek ways of modeling the behaviors we wish to elicit. More is said about this in our discussion of the strategic questions.
the treasures of students’ uniqueness, even when it seems contradictory to what we value or believe. This guideline requires the transformation of these contradictions into paradoxes where the seemingly irreconcilable reach a heretofore unimagined “whole” (e.g., green emerges out of blue and yellow, or creativity out of order and chaos).

There is an old story about six visually challenged men trying to figure out what an elephant was like. Each touched one part of the elephant and reached a different conclusion; one said the elephant was like a fan, based on his experience touching the ears; another said the elephant was like a tree trunk after touching its legs, and so on. When we assess and teach we are all, in a sense, “touching an elephant;” we don’t in the final analysis truly know the full shape of the students we assess and teach. 3rd Space offers a way of being responsive (i.e., honoring the connection between the pieces) by seeking the elephant rather than arguing about who holds the right or best perspective.

WHAT STRATEGIC QUESTIONS SUPPORT THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GUIDELINES?

The Skilled Dialogue© guidelines establish a general framework for crafting respectful, reciprocal and responsive interactions in any situation. More specific strategic questions tailored to specific situations can then be generated based on these guidelines. The questions discussed in this OnPoint and shown in Figure 3 (see next page) are designed to help practitioners apply the Skilled Dialogue© framework to the development of culturally competent assessment and instruction for diverse students.

**QUESTION 1** To what degree and in what ways am I ensuring that selected assessment and instructional materials, procedures, activities & strategies reflect the diverse languages, values, beliefs and behaviors (i.e., funds of knowledge) that define the identities of the students involved?

This first question focuses on what is often depicted as the end point of cultural competency, but is, in fact, the starting point for any competent assessment or instruction: the finding and using of materials, procedures, activities and strategies that reflect or connect in some way with students’ language and funds of knowledge. Questioning how much and how well what we present students with matches what they bring is important for the simple reason that, when there is too large a gap between the two, understanding and performance both suffer. The literature on students’ zones of proximal development’s referenced at the end of this OnPoint speaks to this point.

When a student is asked, for example, to solve a problem or manage a task that is presented in a manner or language that is unfamiliar, not valued and/or not connected in some fashion to existing skills, accurate data on knowledge/
ability cannot be obtained (if assessment) and optimal learning cannot occur (if instruction). Such instances can only provide data on what a student doesn’t know and/or on how a student approaches new and unfamiliar tasks.13

In addition, when there is too large a gap between materials, procedures, activities and/or strategies used for assessment or instruction and students’ funds of knowledge, respect cannot be established in any consistent fashion. If I am speaking to you, for example, and fail to take into account your limited proficiency in the language I am using, or your lack of preference for that language, you will easily conclude that I do not truly see you.

Readers are referred to the Project CLAS website (http://clas.uiuc.edu) for an extensive collection of materials for diverse populations as well as critical reviews and suggestions for their evaluation.

**QUESTION 2** To what degree and in what ways do materials, procedures, activities & strategies — as well as my own interpretations — support the notion of “spectrum” rather than “continuum” (i.e., disallow an “either-or” perspective)?

13There are certainly times when these data are purposely sought; they are not and should not, however, represent the majority of instances for either assessment or instruction.
There is a tendency toward thinking in terms of an “either-or” continuum when assessing and teaching. Questions such as “Do we use English or Spanish?” “Do we use phonics or the whole language?” are frequently raised giving the impression that only one can and should be chosen. This second question asks us to notice how we are supporting this tendency or countering it. It reminds us to look at available assessment and instructional options on a spectrum rather than a continuum. A continuum places things on “opposite” sides; it is understood that as one draws near to one end, the other becomes more distant and, thus, less available. A spectrum, on the other hand, is not directional in this fashion. It presents an array with multiple options, where getting nearer to one option can actually bring you closer to another. A rainbow is a good example of this aspect of spectrums: getting closer to red, which seems to lie farthest from blue, actually moves us closer to blue as the color sequence begins all over again. Assessment and instructional options can be placed in a similar inclusive array, where the selection of one can lead us toward, rather than away from others. In this way, we not only increase the range of available options from which to select, we also model that the selection of one option (e.g., speaking English) need not mean exclusion of another (e.g., continuing to speak Hmong).

**Question 3**  
*To what degree and in what ways am I seeking information on the contexts that sustain and give meaning to students’ values, beliefs and behaviors as compared to the contexts within which I am assessing/teaching?*

In order to ensure that selected materials, procedures, activities and strategies achieve their intended purpose, we must take another step. Question 3 focuses us on the need to obtain information on the contexts that surround specific assessment/teaching instances, both the contexts within which the students are functioning and those within which we are functioning. If, for example, I select to assess/teach primarily in Spanish, what meaning will this convey? How will students and their families understand my choice?

What meaning do they attach to not only Spanish, but more specifically, to the variety of Spanish I have chosen? Many families, for instance, state a preference for English only instruction. Do we really understand why?

An additional reason for paying attention to the contexts that surround assessment and instruction is that they provide a rich source of information in and of themselves. If I want to assess a student’s level of literacy, I first need to know what literacy means in his/her context. Does it mean the same thing as literacy in formal assessment and curriculum materials? Does it instead tend to favor social and oral literacy over written text? Similarly, if I want to teach letter writing, do the forms I choose exist in the students’ context? Do alternate forms exist?

This third question takes Question 1 one step further, reminding us to anchor our understanding of what is before we interpret data on what is. It is equally important to
anchor our understanding of what is before we act to add to or change it.

**QUESTION 4** How am I dealing with contradictions between students’ values, beliefs and behaviors and the values, beliefs and behaviors underlying the materials, procedures, activities and strategies I am using to assess/teach?

Often, getting information on diverse contexts uncovers striking contradictions in the meaning and value attached to designated behaviors and tasks. Behaviors and tasks derive their meaning from the particular contexts in which they are developed. What is valued as a positive behavior in one context may, in fact, not be valued similarly in a different context. Direct questioning or seeking written information on products have a positive value in ENC. In a different context, however, they may not only not be valued; they may actually result in the opposite of what is intended. Direct questioning, for example, may result in getting less rather than more information. Oral histories may contain more valid information than written ones.

What then? Question 4, which addresses how to establish reciprocity (i.e., equally valued voice), asks us to examine this very issue. It asks us to deepen our surrender of an either-or perspective by transforming contradictions—which always value one choice over another—into paradoxes, which recognize that both this behavior and that one make sense, given their context. Reciprocity urges us to acknowledge the validity of someone else’s choices and, thus, see them as equally capable rather than as someone less capable or less intelligent than ourselves. This should not be interpreted to mean that boundaries cannot be set, but rather that everyone has the capability of creating functional responses to life circumstances and of changing those responses when necessary.

**QUESTION 5** To what degree and in what ways am I being responsive rather than reactive; that is, using assessment/instructional materials, procedures, activities and strategies that reflect authentic shared understandings generated through attention, empathy and curiosity rather than familiar prescribed scripts and answers?

If we are to be truly responsive, we can’t stop at the point of reciprocity, where differences are validated. We need to move on to responsiveness. This question and the one following address responsiveness in terms of uncovering points of connection between others’ perspectives, however different, and our own. The first step, as Skilled Dialogue© frames it, is to become mindful. Langer (1997) identified three aspects of mindfulness: “the continuous creation of new categories; openness to new information; and an implicit awareness of more than one perspective.”

Rather than being reactive

---

1^see Barrera, Corso & Macpherson (2003) for discussion of reciprocity and issues of mandated reporting and child protection in cases of abuse and neglect.

15^p. 4
and selecting our responses from familiar prescribed scripts and answers, responsiveness challenges us to remember that wherever we find ourselves is somewhere we’ve never been before, and whatever we face is something we’ve never faced before in this exact same form. That is, we must look at each behavior and situation with deep empathy (e.g., “hmm, that could be me”), curiosity (e.g., “what’s going on?”), and wonder (e.g., “I wonder why he responded that way.”), rather than going on autopilot (e.g., “he scored at a third grade level so I’ll just get the third grade reading curriculum materials and start working.”). Materials, strategies, procedures and activities need to be adapted however subtly to meet the needs of particular students.

**QUESTION 6** To what degree and in what ways am I creating 3rd Space (i.e., developing assessment and/or instructional options that integrate students’ perspectives and strengths with desired academic goals and outcomes)?

This last question invites us to examine the degree to which we are integrating student perspectives and strengths with the perspectives and skills or knowledge that we wish to assess or teach. To what degree do the materials, procedures, strategies and activities we’ve selected “mine” the riches the student brings into the academic context? When we assess, for example, are we tapping into students’ strengths in order to uncover needs and skills (e.g., are we using the students’ strongest learning modes to assess comprehension?). If we are going to teach math, for example, are we accessing students’ funds of knowledge and daily experiences as the raw material for our problems?

**CONCLUSION**

Figure 4 illustrates the use of the Skilled Dialogue© framework in relation to one possible assessment and instructional scenario. It attempts to show how such use can help ensure that assessment and/or instructional interactions (a) honor students’ identities, no matter how diverse; (b) honor students’ voices, whether in agreement or disagreement with our own; and (c) honor connections between students and practitioners in all situations.

While Skilled Dialogue© does not directly identify specific assessment and instructional materials, procedures, strategies or activities, its guidelines and strategic questions can guide the selection and use of available materials, procedures, strategies and activities. In and of itself, that is reason enough for its use. Respectful, reciprocal and responsive assessment and instruction are, however, critically necessary not just to obtain accurate information on students’ ability levels and learning preferences or to develop new skills. There is an even more urgent reason to apply Skilled Dialogue© guidelines and questions to assessment and instruction: the critical

---

16Langer, 2005
necessity to put together—literally re-member—what is so often and unfortunately shattered into broken fragments that hide rather than reveal.

Parker Palmer (1997) puts this eloquently: "Re-membering involves putting ourselves [and our students] together, recovering identity and integrity, reclaiming the wholeness of our lives. When we forget who we are [and who our students are] we do not merely drop some data. We "dis-member" ourselves [and our students], with unhappy consequences for our politics, our work and our heart."17

---

**Figure 4: What Skilled Dialogue© Might Look Like in Relation to a Student with Poor Reading Skills**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anchored Understanding of Diversity</th>
<th>3rd Space</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Obtain the most accurate information on the behaviors, skills, values, beliefs, language(s) through which the student is currently choosing to express his identity in relation to reading. Insure that selected materials are appropriate for the intended purpose (e.g., assessing true comprehension or assessing comprehension of a particular fund of knowledge).</td>
<td>Respect Honors Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simply listen and observe. Refrain from jumping to conclusions about those behaviors (e.g., a low score on vocabulary measures may or may not mean poor vocabulary skills).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Get information on the cultural, social and personal contexts within which the identified reading behaviors, skills, values, beliefs, and language(s) are embedded. Determine the meaning of these behaviors, skills, values, beliefs, and language(s). For example, proficient reading may be associated with wanting to “show off” or shame others. | Reciprocity Honors Voice |
| Affirm how both diverse meanings can exist in seeming contradiction (i.e., paradox): (a) validate meanings within student’s cultural, social and personal contexts as being true and useful (e.g., acknowledge how low reading skills makes sense or has value within those contexts) and (b) at the same time, validate the meaning(s) given to low reading skills in the typical academic context in the US. |

| Explore the contradictory meanings in an empathic mindful manner, take the time and energy to find and connect with this unique student in this particular situation (this particular interaction with you, these particular reading tasks, at this time, in this setting), which however similar is like no other. How is this student, for example, different from the 30 others from similar backgrounds and with similar skills that you’ve taught in the past? | Responsiveness Honors Connection Across Differences |
| Identify the resources and strengths of this unique student in this unique time and place. Integrate them with the resources and strengths available to you to produce greater and more inclusive options for developing reading skills (e.g., you’ve discovered that this student “reads” social situations with exquisite skill — how can this skill contribute to and enhance the text reading skills you’d like to develop?) |

---

17Palmer, p. 20
References


Additional References

ANCHORED UNDERSTANDING


Super, C.M., & Harkness, S. (1981). Figure, ground, and gestalt: The cultural context of the active individual. In R.M. Lerner & N.A. Busch-Rossnagel (Eds.), Individuals as producers of their development (pp.70-83). San Diego: Academic Press.

3RD SPACE


San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.


Wheatley, M.

ASSESSMENT

Brown, W., & Barrera, I. (1999). Enduring problems and ongoing issues in screening infants and toddlers; Infants and Young Children, 12(1), 1-9


INSTRUCTION

Barrera, I., & Kramer, L. (1997). From monologues to skilled dialogues: Teaching the process of crafting culturally


Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services [CLAS] Early Childhood Research Institute


North Central Regional Educational Laboratory. (1994). *Funds of knowledge: A look at Luis Moll’s research into hidden family resources.* CITYSCHOOLS, 1(1), 19-21


Student Art

[Images of various student art projects, including drawings and paintings, with text captions such as "How My Family Helps Me Learn," "My Dreams Reading Homework," and "Despite Our Differences, We Are All Human." ]
GREAT URBAN SCHOOLS:

- Produce high achieving students.
- Construct education for social justice, access and equity.
- Expand students’ life opportunities, available choices and community contributions.
- Build on the extraordinary resources that urban communities provide for life-long learning.
- Use the valuable knowledge and experience that children and their families bring to school learning.
- Need individuals, family organizations and communities to work together to create future generations of possibility.
- Practice scholarship by creating partnerships for action-based research and inquiry.
- Shape their practice based on evidence of what results in successful learning of each student.
- Foster relationships based on care, respect and responsibility.
- Understand that people learn in different ways throughout their lives.
- Respond with learning opportunities that work.
Great Urban Schools: Learning Together Builds Strong Communities