Melting Polar Icebergs: Teaching Law Students to Access Empathy and Channel Their Passion to Empower Their Clients and Themselves

Kathryn P. Banks
Director, Children’s Rights Clinic
Washington University School of Law in St. Louis
The Challenge: “THE OTHER”

- Children’s Rights Clinic
- Working with children and families in St. Louis area
- Population of clients is mainly minority and is from marginalized populations
- Population of students is not this (for the most part)
- Students struggle with representation, students struggle with recognizing and acknowledging some of the challenges, students judgmental
The Fix

- Need to be able to help students surface the issues
- Need to do this relatively early in the semester
- Need to something that can help us begin the conversation at the beginning of the semester and revisit it throughout
Five Habits for Cross Cultural Lawyering

- Sue Bryant and Jean Koh Peters
  - *Race, Culture, Psychology and Law (2005)*
The Habits

- Trust
- Habit 1 - Degrees of Separation and Connection
- Habit 2 - Rings in Motion
- Habit 3 - Parallel Universe
- Habit 4 - Red Flag and Remedies
- Habit 5 - The Camel’s Back
The Exercise

- I have students read the article in preparation for our bootcamp.
- I open up the discussion by simply asking students what they are worried about as they start to do the work.
  - Agency, authority, competence
Starting to dig

- Sometimes a student will give me the bridge and other times I have to push a little more
  - Difference
I ask students to identify cultures that they are a part of

- Ethnicity, race, gender, nationality, age, economic status, social status, language, sexual orientation, physical characteristics, marital status, role in family, birth order, immigration status, religion, accent, skin color etc....
Identifying How Others View You

- Stereotype yourself.
- Think about how others view you.
- How are you different than those stereotypes?
- Stereotypes can be based on difference or similarities.
  - Because you look like me, you are going to act a certain way.
Connecting to the Client

- Just as you are weighing similarities and differences our clients are as well.
- One thing we all have in common with our clients?
- Be mindful and thoughtful of the person behind the “client”.
And then we are off to the races...

- Trust
- Habit 1 - Degrees of Separation and Connection
  - Previous exercise that we revisit as needed
- Habit 2 - Rings in Motion
  - Helping students see how clients might perceive the action in the courtroom often seems to ignite and empower.
- Habit 3 - Parallel Universe
  - We spend A LOT of time here as the semester continues.
- Habit 4 - Red Flag and Remedies
- Habit 5 - The Camel’s Back
The End Result

- Students seem to be better able to think about difference and seem to be more empathetic.
- It provides a safe frame to discuss difficult issues.