

STUDENTS AT METRO HIGH SCHOOL IN COLUMBUS, OHIO, CREATE THEIR CULTURAL DOLLS TO TELL THEIR PERSONAL STORIES.

WOVEN TRADITIONS GOES TO COLLEGE

OHIO STATE ADAPTS CULTURAL PROFICIENCY PROGRAM CREATED FOR SCHOOLCHILDREN AND TEACHERS

BY GENE STOWE

Woven Traditions, a curriculum designed to strengthen the social fabric by raising cultural competency, is reaching an even more diverse audience.

The 30-hour course for schoolchildren and their teachers was written by twin sisters Monica and Marla Marsh. It has been adapted for college students by Dr. M. Susie Whittington, a professor of Agricultural and Extension Education, at The Ohio State University.

The Marshes - Monica is a high school principal near Cincinnati, Marla an elementary school principal - are from inner-city Akron, Ohio, and graduated from Ohio State in 1984.

They spent 3,000 hours developing the curriculum when they couldn't find suitable materials for their students and teachers.

"Our goal is to prepare students with 21st-century skills," Monica says. "One of the 21st-century skills is global awareness. It's one of the most difficult concepts for schools to infuse into their general curriculum."

The course tracks the continuum of cultural proficiency identified by Terry Cross in 1989. The continuum, a sequence of six responses to observed cultural differences, begins with destructiveness - wanting to wipe out the different culture - and ends with proficiency - responding positively, engaging and adapting in the face of difference.

"The full hope would be that they would walk away being culturally proficient,"

Monica says, although positions are not static and awareness must continually develop. "You're moving back and forth on that continuum."

Many teachers often display cultural blindness, third on the continuum, by teaching children from different cultures as if the differences do not matter.

"You've got to be able to connect with kids before you can teach them any kind of content," Monica says.

"If you ignore a person's race, a person's skin color or where that person comes from, you're ignoring part of who that person is. When you honor where they come from, you honor their perspective."

Woven Traditions draws from a different metaphor than the old "melting pot" image that blurred distinctions.

"We understand there is a woven piece, a connection as to how people are," Monica says. "You still have to honor their identity."

The course moves through three domains - engaging, sustaining and deepening a conversation about race, including the presence of "whiteness" as the norms of the dominant culture.

"Before you can begin to explore and understand someone else's racial identity and culture, you have to understand

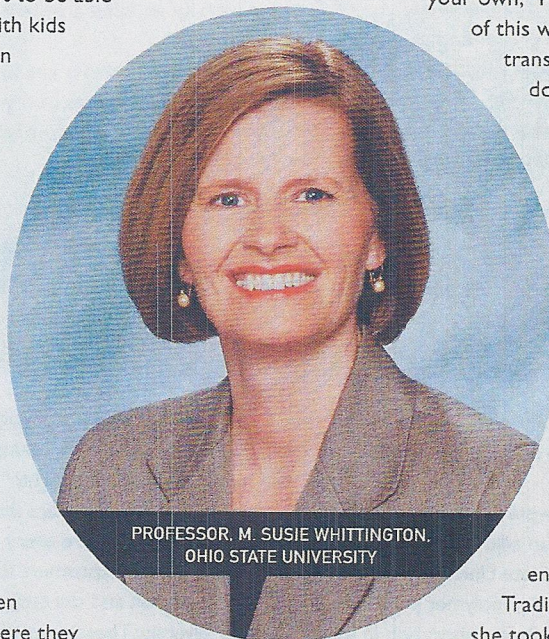
your own," Monica says. "All

of this work is definitely transformative. If you don't have the discussion, you don't take people through the necessary activities."

Differences are deeper than skin culture, she says: "If you want to get to the heart of equity, you've got to look at culture."

Whittington first encountered Woven Traditions in 2008 when she took student teachers to Monica's workshop based on the curriculum.

"I had never felt like I was exclusive or biased but had never been led through some experiences to help crystallize my own beliefs," she recalls. "I had tears running down my face as I listened to my students share their 'Where I am from' poems."



PROFESSOR, M. SUSIE WHITTINGTON,
OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

She decided during the workshop to take the ideas to Ohio State.

"It was just very clear," Whittington says. "I was sitting at the back of the room and immediately pondered: 'How can we have every pre-service teacher be exposed to this type of curriculum, beginning with an introspection of my culture and where I come from and therefore what lens do I tend to look through because of my background, my previous patterns of behavior?'"

"I had never experienced on a personal level even an introduction to a curriculum that focused on that self-introspection and beginning with that first domain in the Woven Traditions curriculum."

Her own reflection on one question from the curriculum – When was the first time you remember encountering someone not like yourself? – revealed the gift of her parents' approach in her tiny Ohio hometown with no stoplight and one black family, whose son played Little League on her father's team with her brother.

"My parents were not biased and prejudiced and I never realized that," Whittington says. "My grandparents clearly used some biased language in their home. My parents never did. I had never appreciated that gift they gave to me."

Whittington won approval for a course



STUDENTS AT METRO HIGH SCHOOL IN COLUMBUS, OHIO, SHARE THEIR DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS AND EXPERIENCES.

based on Woven Traditions, and when she finished teaching it for the first time, three students stayed on to learn more with her and develop workshops for high school students.

When Ohio State completes a transition to a semester system next year, the course will be a requirement in her department and could be offered across the university to fulfill a general education requirement.

"Most of my students are like me – coming from white rural backgrounds," Whittington says. "Most go back to those environments.

Just because we're all rural white kids doesn't mean we all have the same cultural backgrounds."

Monica says the effort holds promise for both teachers and students.

"My sister and I happen to be African-American," she says. "Susie is white and the majority of her kids are white.

"However, the students they go to teach are not all going to be white. She gets that and her kids get it. They embrace it. It's going to be so much more of a rich experience." **RID**



IN DECEMBER, 2010, STUDENTS AT THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY RECEIVE A CERTIFICATE IN INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT UPON COMPLETION OF THE WOVEN TRADITIONS CURRICULUM.

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