

From Many Standpoints

An activity of "Some words hurt. Put them in the dustbin."

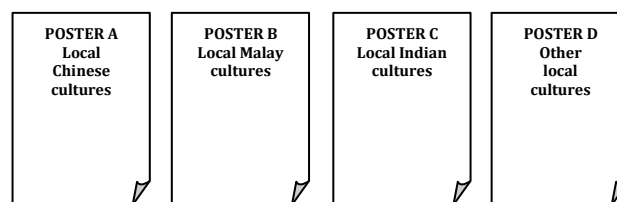
Did you know that every object in your classroom is seen differently by each student? Let's say that your art teacher asks all of you to sketch the teacher's table without getting up from your seat. No two sketches will be identical. That is because each of you sees that table from a slightly different **standpoint**. Where you sit in the room, the colours that your eyes detect, the mood you are in, what you feel about teachers' tables in general, how much you like art, and all sorts of other factors will creep into that one sketch of yours.

Something very similar happens when we look at various ethnic communities. If we see all human beings as being alike, then we are more likely to notice commonalities than differences. All sorts of **biases** — unfair thoughts or prejudices — also influence what each of us sees in society. Mostly, the biases work so quietly in our brains that we may not even know they exist. Yet, biases influence our thoughts, words, and actions.

Some of our biases are created by **cultural blind spots**. A cultural blind spot means exactly that: in every culture, there are parts you can't see, and you may not even know you can't see those parts. All of us have cultural blind spots. Fortunately, there is an easy solution: team up with people who have different standpoints from yours. That way, together you would be able to see more parts despite each one's blind spots. Explore this approach by carrying out the following activity in class.

PART I: ROUND ROBIN

- a) Make four posters using flipchart paper. In bold letters, give each poster its title: "Local Chinese cultures", "Local Malay cultures", "Local Indian cultures", "Other local cultures". These posters represent the four general racial categories used in Singapore. With masking tape, mount the posters far apart on your classroom walls.



- b) Split your class into four groups. Every student should have a felt-tipped marker. The groups rotate from poster to poster, spending 20 minutes at each. Have one student be the timekeeper who lets the groups know when to move.

1st round: Group 1 → Poster A; Group 2 → Poster B; Group 3 → Poster C; Group 4 → Poster D.

2nd round: Group 1 → Poster D; Group 2 → Poster A; Group 3 → Poster B; Group 4 → Poster C.

3rd & 4th rounds: Continue rotating in this manner so that every group visits each poster.

When your group goes to its first poster, write on it all that you know about the sub-cultures within that broad racial category. For instance, write on Poster A about festivals, foods, dressing, and other details about the Cantonese, Hainanese, Hakka, Teochew or any of the other dialect groups found locally. You may add your thoughts and feelings. Reminder: always use polite, respectful language.

When your group gets to the next poster, the previous group would have already been there. First, read all that is written on it. Then, add your points. You may agree or disagree with anything there. You may also point out whatever you see as an error or an unfair statement. Write enough so that your classmates will understand what you are saying.

PART II: GALLERY WALK & DISCUSSION

- a) After the round-robin exercise, revisit all the posters on your own to read what has been written by your classmates. Pay extra attention to comments that disagree or claim there are errors.
- b) Then, prepare for a discussion by reading the article “**Some words hurt. Put them in the dustbin.**” on page 17 of the *What’s Up* May issue. This article can also be found at the *What’s Up* website at <http://more.whatsup.sg/welcome-2/icerd/>.
- c) In small groups of two or three students, respond to the following questions. There are no right or wrong answers. Instead, use the questions to help you to talk about your experience of the round-robin exercise and the gallery walk.

Guiding Questions

- How easy was it for you to write what you know about each racial category on the posters?
- Which racial category do you know the most about? Why is that so?
- Which racial category do you know the least about? Why is that so?
- What can you say about the points that students disagreed with? What about claims that there were errors?
- In what ways do this round-robin exercise and gallery walk help you to see different standpoints?
- When we try to understand other people’s cultures, why is it important to ask them to share their standpoints?
- In your honest opinion, do you think that there are biases reflected in what was written on the posters? Give examples to back your answer.
- Based on what you now know about these racial communities, what were a couple of your cultural blind spots in the past?
- How can you learn more about your own as well as other students’ ethnic backgrounds? Suggest two or three ways that would work for you.
- As the round robin was done in class, no one may have written racial slurs or other rude comments on the posters. What if these posters were put up in a public space where anyone could write on them? Would you expect biases to be stated more clearly? Speculate.

NOTE: The category “Other local cultures” includes a wide variety of minority ethnic communities in Singapore. Some of them — including Eurasians, Jews, Singhalese, Portuguese, and Armenians — have been here for many generations. They are all clubbed into one category called “Other” only because they are smaller in number. Their ethnic cultures are as rich as anyone else’s. When minority groups exist in very small numbers, the rest of us may have even more cultural blind spots about them.