Good afternoon.

Whoa, we have to do better than that. Let’s try again.

Good afternoon!

That is what my culture calls “call and response.” It is part of our tradition and part of that oral language that comes out of Africa. I am very interested in culture; I have been since my earliest days. I am always looking to understand it better and to spread that joy to others. I am also interested in closing the gap, the cultural gap that exists between educators and the minority students, at-risk students, and low-income students in this country.

As I look at this challenge, part of what we need to understand is, who is teaching? When we look at who is teaching and who is being taught, there is no match there. And the gap between the teaching force and the student core is only growing wider.

I am not telling you anything you probably do not already know. The existing teacher core is 90 percent European American and about 65–70 percent female, while the student core is continually becoming more and more diverse. In our urban centers, the student core is already a majority minority.

Consider the impact of immigration on this cultural gap. There are vast differences between the immigration waves that took place in the early 1900s and what is taking place now as we open the twenty-first century. In the 1900s, we saw southern and eastern Europeans coming into this country. This influenced the population that is now our dominant culture, from which our current teaching core has evolved. A century later, 80 percent of our immigration is Latino—from the Caribbean, from Central and South
America—and Asian. That is a very different cultural mix for this nation, and a very different mix in our schools. And we are certainly going to be challenged by that.

Of course, this effect will not be spread evenly across the country. In fact, it is going to be concentrated in about nine states, especially California, Florida, New York, Illinois, and Texas. These states will have powerful concentrations of what Dr. Marcelo Suarez-Orozco of Harvard calls hyper-segregation. This presents a real challenge to us in terms of preparing these students to do meaningful work in what I refer to as the fourth wave.

Wave theory was introduced by our opening speaker. It is one of those components that is extremely fascinating to me in terms of what is taking place within this nation and the impact it is going to have on the world. It raises the question, and a challenging one, of whether a predominately white, Euro-American, female, middle-class teaching core can effectively teach an increasingly diverse student core that is largely middle and lower class.

If we look at the current achievement data, the answer is obviously no. We have not been successful at effectively teaching all children in America. I believe part of the reason is the class/culture mismatch that often occurs in our classrooms. Can this mismatch be overcome? Obviously. How can we overcome it? By really good teacher preparation. By commitment to continued professional development. And by the connectivity illustrated in the High Tech High school that Larry Rosenstock told you about.

But how do we equip our teachers to make that connection? How do we give them that continuing professional development? How do we change their preparation so that they have the literacy, and here I am talking about cultural literacy, to be effective with this new, diverse student population? Most teacher education programs lack cultural diversity within the teaching faculty that prepares our future teachers. I am one of those who labor in the desert of rural Illinois. We call it Macomb. It is so isolated, we are just now finally getting a four-lane highway that links us all the way to Chicago. It has taken a long time to develop that, but now you can at least go north. Going any other direction is still a real challenge. Western Illinois University is an oasis in the midst of corn and soybean fields, and as Dick said, it is pretty white. Out of 689 tenure-track faculty at our university, we have only 18 African-Americans and 9 Hispanics. That is not much diversity. In teacher education programs across the United States, diversity is minimal. The faculty body often looks very much like the teacher core in K–12 public and private schools across the
country in terms of its lack of diversity. Our student teachers simply are not getting the diverse cultural experiences they need to be successful with our increasingly diverse student body.

So how do we deal with this lack of diversity within our teaching programs? Well, I am one of those individuals who likes to try to solve problems, and modern technology helps us solve this one. At WIU, we bring diversity into the classroom by developing a variety of multimedia solutions: like the teleclass called “Dealing with Diversity.” This teleclass examines a variety of topics ranging from race, class, and gender to ability issues, age issues, and more. We teach five or six sections every semester. It is also taught in another 125 colleges and universities across our nation. “Dealing with Diversity” is also available as a telecourse in 24 one-hour segments through the PBS adult education system. And the United States Navy just picked it up, so we digitized the program for use on submarines and aircraft carriers.

Over time, we have developed a growing family of “Dealing with Diversity” programs. When we developed “Dealing with Diversity 2,” I thought it would be a good idea to have companion resources to go with the tapes, so we produced the “Dealing with Diversity Anthology.” The anthology is a collection of writings by and interviews with the guests that appear in the program. These include people like Maulana Karenga, Michael Omi, Lisa Delpit, Carlos Munoz, Ronald Takaki, and David Duke. We also developed a CD-ROM called “Multicultural Prism: Diversity in the Curriculum,” which students can take with them into their own classroom when they become teachers. This rich resource includes videotaped interviews and even lesson plans that you can download into hard copies for use in the classroom. And now we are developing another CD-ROM that will be even more comprehensive than the first, as we try to meet the needs of our educational community.

In addition to offering our students greater diversity among the faculty, technology lets us expose them to greater diversity in the public school environment. Again, being in Western Illinois, we do not have much diversity in the local public school student population. Our teacher education students would have to travel for an hour and a half to two hours by bus in order to reach an urban area where diverse public school populations exist. We simply cannot afford that kind of cost, either in terms of transportation or time. Our technological solution to this problem has been to establish two-way interactive video setups at a number of sites. We have two-way interactive setups in several schools in the Springfield area, as well as a rural school in
Dallas City. The Springfield sites include the Ball Charter Elementary School and a middle school, both of which have very diverse populations. Our students can then access this two-way video experience through a number of classrooms on our Macomb campus. Participating teachers and aides assist our students; this experience has worked extremely well. Hundreds of our students take advantage of this opportunity as part of their field experience every semester. There really is tremendous promise in this use of technology.

Another thing I want to talk about is the notion of educational reform. I do not think we look at educational reform in a broad enough sense. Most traditional education in our country has followed an assimilationist model in which we have asked individuals from different cultural and ethnic groups in essence to surrender their cultural individuality in order to become Americans. This has worked for some but certainly not for all. The notion of the melting pot may have worked well for most European groups, but it certainly did not work well for others, especially for those who were melanin proficient. (That is my own term. I talk about the melanin proficient; I talk about the melanin challenged; sometimes I even talk about the melanin deficient. And my students seem to like the new language.) But why did the melting pot concept work well for some but not for all? Because we asked students to give up their culture and for those cultures who did not blend in easily this strategy became almost suicidal. I think we need to develop schools that focus on acculturation rather than assimilation. Students need the opportunity to maintain their Culture One while they learn what is necessary in Culture Two to be proficient within the operating society. That is a very different approach than most schools take in this place we call the United States of America.

So how do we demonstrate this acculturation approach to our students in Macomb? We made a documentary called “Pedagogy of Place.” It gave me a wonderful opportunity to go out to Navajo Country and visit a school called Little Singer Community School, a charter school on the Navajo Nation. It is a very innovative school in terms of being able to bridge traditional Navajo culture and those aspects of our traditional education system that are necessary for students to be proficient in the operating society and become good tax-paying citizens so we “Baby Boomers” can retire. The area, outside Flagstaff, is some of the most desolate land you can imagine, but the students love the land and they love Little Singer. In fact, some students actually sabotage their grades in an attempt to stay at Little Singer so they will not have to go on to the traditional white high school in Winslow. The documentary
we filmed shows the tremendous engagement of the students. They have also just founded a new school, called a Star School, about 50 miles from Little Singer. It is totally off the grid. The only electricity is generated by wind and solar convection methods.

So how do we show our students examples of this kind of alternative education? How do we bring this acculturation model into the classroom in Macomb, Illinois? How do we take this experience in Arizona and make it part of the experience of students in western Illinois? We use technology to bring classrooms of diversity to our students. This allows us to bring people of color into mostly white classrooms. Strategies like this can expand the experiences of our predominantly white teacher core and expose them to intelligences they may not have encountered before. Hopefully, as a result our students will be able to work more effectively in the culturally diverse classrooms that they will face in the 21st century.