Hello, I'm Teresa Langness.

I'd like to talk to you in this session about a very important subject, a subject that's increasingly more important: the concept of how we regard each other, how that affects what's happening in our world, and how the relationships we build with one another affect the health of our human family.

This has come to mind with some new research recently about trust. A study that was done on a couple of different campuses in Europe, said that we trust one another. And to the extent that we do, we affect global health. In this study, the researchers tried to determine which countries were decreasing their hospitalizations and death rates to hear from COVID-19. And they measured many, many factors. And the one thing that they found made the greatest difference was, do people trust one another? Do they trust their neighbors? Do they trust their fellow human beings, not just their physicians and their scientists, but each other. In those countries with the highest levels of trust, health improved.

It reminded me of another study that was done decades ago in the 1950s about contact between individuals of very diverse ethnic backgrounds, faith backgrounds, cultural backgrounds, in which they brought people together, to get to know each other personally, and found that their level of prejudice diminished quite a bit from having personal conversations with people on the other side of the aisle, whom they formerly had avoided.

We know that as we perceive each other as being part of the same system, part of the same world system, the same system of living species, we begin to care, we begin to personalize issues that formerly seemed outside ourselves. This is really important in our work as educators to build an environment in the classroom where no one sees themselves as an outsider, where we have an inclusive atmosphere, and everyone feels accepted. Everyone is appreciated for their diverse capacities. Everyone is appreciated, despite their unique perspectives, where they come from, whatever their background.

This has been going on a lot in the classrooms that we were involved in over the last 10 or 20 years, where appreciation of diversity might be as simple as having children advocate for their favorite vegetable. They then sit down and share it together at a table and learn to appreciate each other's food choices. Or it might be as essential as having children speak out for the one in the classroom who has a different learning capacity. I call them alter-abled children rather than disabled. Because everyone can do something.

One thing that you can do when you're introducing new teachers to a group or when you're introducing students in a new situation is to pair them together. We call this shared pairs of dyads. Have them interview one another, and then ask them to seek out something they have in common. Put them in groups where they are not naturally inclined to be like minded. You might have them count off by twos and pair up with somebody that would not naturally sit at their table, would not naturally be their best friend, and then have them look for something a little bit deep, not necessarily a surface issue. Give them prompts so that they try to find something they have in common with one another in their pairs. Then they stand up and introduce their partner to the class, their brother or sister to the class based on that commonality. They're not saying this is my friend, so and so who has hair color different than mine, or comes from a different part of town, different part of the village, or even who has a different tribal origin. They are talking about shared preference. They're talking about an experience that they each had early in childhood, they're talking about something that's important to both of them. They're beginning to see commonality, commonalities.

Below the surface, they're learning a very important skill, the skill of relating to each other, not around differences, but around that essential humanness that we all have. Just try this as an interesting experiment.

One time we were doing this in workshop, and one gentleman said, “Well, why aren’t we looking for differences?” Well, you could use that same strategy to look for differences. But then what are you reinforcing? Something that's all too common in our current milieu.

By the same token, when we introduce a strategy called the conflict bridge, we are looking beyond differences, looking for that introspective part of ourselves. That speaks to the application of the habit-of-heart. We're striving with all of our mind not to apply judgment, but to look for the reasons behind the conflict.

I will show you what the steps are on the conflict bridge by sharing my screen just for a minute here. I hope you can see it. We have many pictures of the bridge. You can look at those independently. I hope you can see what these steps say, because this is the important part.

Two people stand facing each other. They each have the same steps in front of them. One person, the person who's starting, is the person who has a request. If it's a little child, it may be a request as simple as “I want the toy that you took away from me” or “I want a chance to stand in line first because I was in front of you.” If you're playing the role of a head of state, it might be “I want you to give me back my turf, because you are on the boundary of my country and your eucalyptus trees are taking all of the water. I now have deforested land on my side.” I don't make these up. We get them from current events, newspapers. We have students resolve real world conflicts generally, or conflicts from the history book, or something related to the curriculum.

The next person then responds, “Well, I also wanted that space in the front of the line,” or, “I also needed that land for my people.” It's good farmland, whatever it is, they respond with a similar statement. Their counterpart then states an emotion, just any emotion with no elaboration. I feel frustrated. I feel betrayed. I feel confused. I feel sad if it's a young child and their counterpart does the same. The other students in the room act as the conscience they're listening. They're listening so that they can be helpful.

Number three, I feel this way, because now this is where the two parties have a chance to elaborate. If it's the eucalyptus trees, the first spokesperson might say, “I feel this way, because my tree, the trees that you've planted on my border land, are creating a useful product for you. You're making money from the eucalyptus oil while my people, in the meantime, have increasingly seen their funds decrease from from selling produce on this farmland. And I don't have enough in my national bankroll to be able to feed them. We're feeling food insecurity because of your choice.” You can make a valid reasoning like this. And the other head of state might say, well, “Our eucalyptus oil is so essential because we are experiencing deforestation in a different part of our country.” So they go back and forth. They only get one chance to speak on this step.

Then the audience, the rest of the class, can be asked by the teacher or the mediator, “Do you feel you've heard their story? Do you feel that you have enough information that you could empathize if you were the partner?” They began to get engaged, and they began to give input.

Then comes the important step. Number four, this is an empathy step. They don't make a judgement here, they don't get the opportunity to say you're right or you're wrong, or I'm justified and you're not. They can only say exactly what they heard. “I understand that you feel frustrated, because your people are not able to eat, because the land is now parched.” That's an example. Just what you heard. If they didn't hear it, the other side may need to repeat it. And then their partner does the same.

There have been a few cases where there was so little in the way of listening or empathy, or ability to put their own emotions aside, because by now, both people are very invested in the role that they're playing. Even though this is hypothetical, we have had to take their hands, and walk them to the other side of the aisle, and have them trade places, and speak for the partner, who they are empathizing with, and then take them back to the other side of the bridge. This is a very interesting process. Very quickly, people get into the role of speaking on behalf of those in the conflict. Once they've really had a chance to express true empathy, without any judgement, they cannot say, I feel that you are ignorant, or I feel that you are selfish. Never Is there a point for judgment. Or to say, “I understand that you feel the way you do because you're wrong. And I'm right.” Never a chance for that. Each can only paraphrase what the other one has experienced. So now they've truly heard each other.

Most of the time. This is where they have the epiphany. And they realize, “Oh, you feel the way that you do because your people haven't enough to eat because of the land is dry. My people feel the same way.” There's some kind of a subtle realization of something in common. That usually happens around step four. Whether it's the child with a toy, or in line, whether it's a head of state, whether it's a local community member at the store, whether it's two people, neighbors in the community, something happens by the time they get to step five, generally.

On step five, it can help in the following ways. They have to put their own offer. First, whoever is the first speaker has to think of how they can show the current habit-of-heart to make an offer that will be helpful. “Hmm. Wow, what can I do with those eucalyptus trees?” And we've had some really, really creative ideas. In the case of the eucalyptus trees, I believe that it was a 10 year old who said, “I'm going to put buckets at the bottom of every tree and spigots in the trucks. And we are going to use the water to, to carry it across to your land, and set up in a new irrigation system for your country. And we're just going to take the eucalyptus oil for ours.” They come up with some really creative ideas, and then the other partner responds in kind, saying, here's how I can help. They both have to make a sacrifice, they both have to compromise in trying to help the other one, to find solutions that will be satisfactory to both.

The solution might be different if the habit-of-heart is sacrifice versus creativity, or kindness or advocacy. So it does help that they are looking for creative examples of what that habit-of-heart means in the context of the conflict bridge. There are so many creative ways to go about this exercise. That's what makes it interesting, because you're always using new hypothetical scenarios. And the habit-of-heart is new with each learning unit. You may use this exercise only once in a learning unit, or some people use it every week, every Friday. You can have traditions such as that.

We do recommend that you use it with at least three types of conflicts: a personal conflict, a community-based conflict and a global conflict. So that the children begin to understand the parallels between what we're doing in our personal lives, and what they will someday do as adults.

Even on the world stage, when you have two petulant world leaders, they might as well be on the playground. Sometimes they are doing acting out processes they never really had the chance to figure out when they were in school, so you're doing them a great service. You can always send the students to the drawing board and say, well, let's study what really happened in history. Let's go to the conflict bridge, see if we can work it out, and then we'll come back to history. Let's see if we can stop this war in its tracks. And then go back and see what the world leaders did. Did they stop it or not? You can build suspense in a literature assignment, in a history assignment. You can use it in so many ways.

The conflict bridge is a very popular tool that we use. We have vinyl conflict bridges, but also many schools around the world do cut out each step and put it down on the ground and just use six paper steps on one side and five on the other. That works just as well. It has been translated into multiple languages. Some students go out and draw one on the playground in chalk if they have a paved area. That works, too.

I hope that this has been a helpful discussion. Thank you for listening.