

Too quick to judge

Getting to know someone is the first part of establishing a meaningful relationship. A Life Skills workshop teaches students the danger of misjudging people based only on appearances

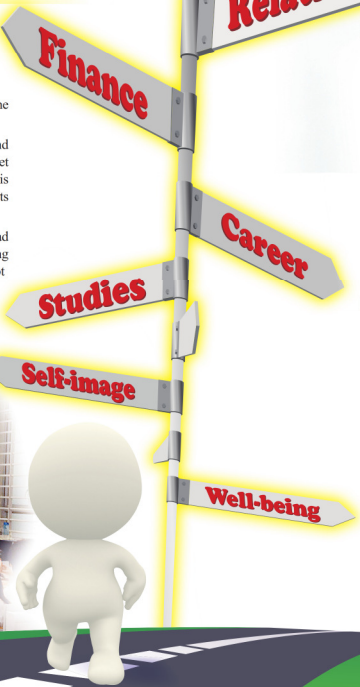
WALKING into the classroom, I thought the The Women's Foundation (TWF) Life Skills Programme was going to be just another typical Liberal Studies workshop. By the end, I realised my first **impression** was completely wrong.

The class started with a few exciting warm-up games. However, the most striking part of the class was a very thought-provoking exercise.

We were given descriptions of either two girls (Rose and Mary) or two boys (Paul and Smith). Rose comes from a middle-class family. Her mother works very hard and tries to set a good example. Her father is a district councillor. Rose gets along with her teachers. She is artistic, and she is often complimented for her style. She is outgoing, enjoys acting, and gets along with her classmates.

On the other hand, Mary's father drinks and her parents are divorced. Her father has a bad temper and gets into fights easily. Her mother is rarely home. Mary likes to wear tight-fitting clothes and **Gothic** make-up. She smokes and has lots of boyfriends. She daydreams a lot during class. Similarly, Paul and Smith are also contrasting cases.

We were asked to discuss Rose and Mary in our group based on the descriptions given, and write down our impressions of these two girls on a large piece of paper.



Making judgements

WE thought Rose sounded **spoiled**. She probably always gets what she wants, and acts like a princess. Other people in my group said she is a goody-two-shoes and always pretends to do as she is told. She is top in her class and gets praised a lot. She is always **sucking up** to teachers so she will get into a good university.

I thought Mary was more like some of us. My parents are rarely at home because they always have to work, so I was pretty sure that she lacks love and attention at home. Like an 'MK' (Mong Kok) girl, she wears tight clothes, smokes, does not like to study and has lots of boyfriends because she is very **flirty** with guys. My group shared the same feelings as me.

Our group was satisfied with our descriptions. So when the instructor told us that Rose and Mary are the same person – her name is actually Rosemary – I was taken by surprise. Many of us argued that she must suffer from a multiple personality disorder!

Same person, different sides

THE instructor explained that Rosemary's parents, while they come from middle class backgrounds, are divorced. Being a district councillor did not guarantee he was a good husband and father. The pressures and demands of being a district councillor drove her father to become an alcoholic. When he drank, he physically abused her mother. That is why her mother divorced her father. Her mother had to start working very hard in order to support Rosemary, who lives with her. She always tries to set a good example for her daughter. Rosemary does not feel enough affection at home since her mother always needs to work. She dresses up to attract guys and seeks attention from boyfriends. She picked up a smoking habit from her boyfriends, who think smoking is cool, and it also makes her feel less stressed. Her cheerful and active personality makes it easy for her to get along with her teachers and classmates.

After telling us Rosemary's story, the instructor explained that we all have different sides. None of us will behave the same way in life situations and when playing different roles, but we all have our own reasons for our actions. We should not judge people based only on rumours. What we see is also not always the way things are, just like in the warm-up game we played. We only get to see what people choose to show. Just as Rosemary has two sides to her, so do we – and probably more.

The issue with bullying

ACCORDING to reflections written by student participants, about half of nearly 1,000 students said they had some experience of being labelled or bullied. They often felt sad and distressed over these experiences. The other half had the opposite experience of labelling or bullying others. This result is **alarming**.

One of the reasons for students' tendency to label and bully other students is that they are simply reflecting societal norms.

According to Dr Anita Chan, Academic Advisor of the TWF Life Skills Programme and Associate Professor at the Hong Kong Institute of Education, "Our society doesn't really appreciate differences because we have too many social norms, too many uniform standards. And when someone doesn't conform to those norms and standards, we think they're the ones with the problem. We think they're weird and feel **justified** in discriminating against them."

This phenomenon is common amongst Hong Kong girls. "If you're a girl and you're slim and pretty, you get a lot of privileges. If you're not slim, you need a lot of courage to resist or stand-up to these views like being called a 'pork chop.' But even then, people just think you're not willing to face reality," Dr Chan pointed out.

Change starts from within

"HOW many of us think that a disabled person can be a leader?" she challenged. She further illustrated her point on norms by bringing up South Korean viral pop artist PSY: "He's more a novelty figure outside our culture like Susan Boyle. We accept him because he's already popular and successful. To change our own society and culture we have to reward our own people for being different from mainstream culture." But she says we lack such examples.

Dr Chan acknowledged that Hong Kong's education system contributes to enforcing social norms: "Success in Hong Kong's education system is very narrowly defined. For boys, success means getting good grades and being sporty. For girls, it means getting good grades and being well-behaved and caring."

It takes a lot of character strength, confidence and courage to be different in Hong Kong, but change, while slow, always starts with individuals. TWF is hopeful that its Life Skills Programme will encourage students to step up to this meaningful and **fulfilling** challenge.