

An Exploration of Culture

Lesson #1: WHAT IS CULTURE?

TIME

50 minutes

(To complete this lesson an advance assignment is necessary in addition to this 50-minute session.)

MATERIALS FROM TRUNK

Worksheet #1 - My Family's Heritage

OTHER MATERIALS

Globe or world map

TEACHER PREPARATIONS

Review the historical background section of this lesson.

Make a copy of worksheet #1 for each student.

Have students complete this worksheet before beginning the activity in this lesson.

OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to:

- 1) define community
- 2) recognize differences and similarities in various cultures and communities
- 3) exhibit their understanding of these terms by relating the words to their lives
- 4) use their understanding of culture and community in exploring their families' heritage

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

We all consider ourselves to be unique individuals with a set of personal opinions, preferences, habits, and quirks. Indeed, all of us are unique individuals, and yet we share many feelings, beliefs, and habits with most of the people who live in our society. Most of us share the feeling that it is wrong to eat pets, the belief that bacteria or viruses cause illness, and the habit of sleeping on a bed.

If only one person thinks or does a certain thing, that thought or action represents a personal habit, not a pattern of culture. For a thought or action to be considered cultural, it must be commonly shared by some population or group of individuals.

Not all things shared by a population are cultural. The typical, natural, hair color is not cultural because it is genetically determined. Culture on the other hand is learned. Humans eat because they must, but what and when and how they eat is learned and varies from culture to culture. Children observe and copy behaviors from their parents and siblings, and later from friends, acquaintances, and the world around them. They gradually learn to live

within the boundaries set by those within their communities.

Defining the culture of communities at the national level is fairly general. People within a nation or country usually share a common language, foods that are found within their geographic area of the world, sometimes a common religion, and government structure. Consider the United States. People throughout the United States have numerous things in common that make up the American culture. These include a belief in the rights guaranteed by the Constitution, the view that the faster food is prepared the better, language, education, music, and clothing. These similarities make us "Americans." These are also many of the things people from other countries associate with the United States and Americans.

The cultures of American communities at the local level are more detailed than those at the national. This means that there is diversity within culture. These diverse and individual cultures fit within the culture of the larger national community. Local cultural diversity may include language dialects, differing food preferences, variations in rituals and holiday celebrations, and sports preferences. Consider the United States. Your community has a culture of its own that differs from that of localities in other parts of the United States, but your community's culture still fits within that of the larger national community. The culture of a Kansas town probably does not include surfing, a daily diet of fresh seafood, and riding a subway to work. On the other hand, KU basketball may be followed more closely here than in Maine, many teenagers have a drivers license, and seeing a cow is not too unusual. Even with these local differences most people in Kansas towns speak English, are familiar with McDonald's and the current movies at the theatre, and generally fit within the American culture.

Many people think of the United States as a melting pot. This refers to the concept of assimilation, the belief that this country is a place where a variety of cultures come together, lose their individuality, and conform to the dominate culture. A different analogy is that of a tossed salad. The tossed salad analogy refers to the concept of acculturation. This analogy also views the United States as a mixture of cultures coming together to form a culture unique to this country. It differs from the melting pot analogy by alluding to the fact that even though these cultures adapt to their new surroundings they keep their individuality to a certain extent just like tomatoes, lettuce, onions, and other salad fixings have individual identities within the salad.

For more information see:

Julie Catalano's *The Mexican Americans* included in this trunk, pages 71-73.

Ember, Carol R. and Melvin Ember. *Cultural Anthropology* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall).

VOCABULARY

- **Ancestor** = A person from whom one is descended such as a grandparent.
- **Community** = A group of people who share a common interest.
- **Culture** = Shared world view and beliefs of a particular community transmitted through its arts, beliefs, and customs.
- **Custom** = A traditional practice.

- **Heritage** = Something that is handed down from earlier generations or from the past; tradition.
- **Tradition** = The practice of passing down customs, beliefs, or other knowledge from parents to children, neighbor to neighbor, or worker to worker.

ACTIVITY

Advance Homework Assignment:

- 1) Introduce the subject of culture and how it pertains to this lesson.

Culture is the arts, beliefs, traditions, and customs that make up a way of life for a group of people at a certain time. This may involve a certain type of clothing or food, celebrating special holidays or having special traditions for holidays, etc.

Because the United States is a place where many cultures have come together it possesses more cultural variation than some other countries. Most families have traditions that have been passed down from earlier generations. Traditions are familiar practices that remind people of special times and places.

People moving to a new country might practice, or carry on, traditions from their homeland to keep them from getting homesick, to remind them of happy memories, or because they are used to doing things a certain way.

- 2) Have the class explore whether some of their families' traditions have been carried over from the cultures of their ancestors. To do this have the students use the questions on worksheet #1, My Family's Heritage, to ask family members about traditions that have been carried down through their families. (A few days may need to be allowed for this activity.) The questions on this worksheet are:
 - What country did your ancestors come from?
 - Does your family have a favorite recipe or meal for holidays and special occasions? Where did this recipe come from?
 - Does your family have stories that have been passed down from your grandparents or an ancestor?
 - Do any of your relatives speak another language? If so, what is the language and where or when did they learn it?
 - Do you have special items that have been passed down through your family as keepsakes? What are they and why are they important to you?
 - What holidays are important to your family? How are they celebrated? Have any of these holiday traditions been passed down from your grandparents or other ancestors?

At this point begin the in-class portion of lesson 1, *What Is Culture?*.

- 1) On the board write the definition of community.

A group of people who share a common interest.

Have the class read this definition and list off a variety of communities that they are part of.

This should include things such as families, scouting groups, sports teams, musical groups, religious organizations, and school.

After this list is fairly inclusive have the class review it. Ask them if they can see any patterns. Points that may be visible are:

- A) individuals belong to more than one community, and
B) there are communities within communities.

An example would be the community of the class. Everyone in the community of the class is part of other communities separate from that of the class (church groups, sports teams, families, etc.). At the same time, the community of the class is part of the larger community of the school. This community in turn is part of the school district, the city or town, etc.

At this point the class should be fairly comfortable with the concept of community.

- 2) Show the class a globe or world map. Explain that there are many communities in the world and that culture is how people within these communities express their views and beliefs through their arts and customs.

Culture includes the food we eat, the clothing we wear, the songs we sing, and the type of houses we live in. Basically we are reflections of our culture. Every community has its own culture. Culture is learned and is not genetic.

The lives of the people in these communities may vary due to the climate they live in, the geography of the area in which they live, the type of work they do, or their socioeconomic level within their society. People all over the world are alike in some ways and different in other ways.

They all eat, sleep, and live in some type of housing, but they eat different foods, sleep at different times in different types of beds, and live in different types of houses.

- 3) Have students number a piece of paper from 1 to 10. Ask them to think of all the children of the world as the following statements are read. As you read each statement have each student write true or false next to the number corresponding to the statement being read.

1. All children play games - **True**
2. All children sleep. - **True**
3. All children help pick out their own clothes. - **False**

4. All children ride bicycles. - **False**
5. All children go to school. - **False**
6. All children speak English. - **False**
7. All children watch television. - **False**
8. All children play baseball. - **False**
9. All children live in a houses. - **False**
10. All children like hamburgers. - **False**

Next read the statements, one at a time, and have the students discuss their answers. Encourage discussion as to why some statements are false.

Some of these statements are part of our culture but may not be part of the cultures of children from other places in the world.

Examples include:

#3. Maybe they must wear school uniforms.

#4. Families who live on a boat or in mountainous regions may not have bikes.

#8. Baseball is an American sport. Some children may have never heard of baseball.

- 4) Remind students that culture is the way people live.

We learn our cultural "rules" from the people who we spend time with such as parents, sisters, brothers, other relatives, friends, teachers, neighbors, etc. It can include such things as what time you eat dinner, what you consider important, how you treat your friends, or how we celebrate holidays.

- 5) At this time ask students to look at the information they have gathered using worksheet #1, My Family's Heritage.

Initiate a discussion about what they learned about their families doing this exercise.

Compare the differences and similarities between students' findings. Are there any traditions that are shared among students? Are there any traditions that are not shared by students in the class?

EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

- 1) Students may choose another state or country and write a short report as to how the customs of one area might differ from that of another.
- 2) Make arrangements with a school in another state/country. Have students establish pen pals and correspond about differences and similarities between their states/countries.

- 3) See the other lessons in this manual dealing with culture: "Existing Side by Side: Bicultural Communities," "Mexicans: Old Roots, Young People," "The Hispanic Face of Kansas," and any of the lessons in the section "The Heritage Continues."
- 4) Ask students to bring a family recipe from home. Combine these into a class cookbook.
- 5) Have students bring a favorite dish from home to share with the class.
- 6) Have students research the country of their heritage and make a native dress costume from that country. It could be a drawing, paper dolls, or an actual costume. Use these costumes in a cultural parade or fair to celebrate all cultures. Have students make a replica of that country's flag to carry in the parade. Remember that the customs and traditions of any community change over time. The native dress of a country could vary due to geographic location, the time period being represented, or the influence of a pan culture movement or revivals of past traditions and customs.
- 7) Show pictures of various cultural practices and ask students to identify what they see and what similarities may be found in their own culture.
- 8) View the videos included in this trunk: *The Hispanic Face of Kansas* and *Hispanic Culture Series: Mexican People and Culture*.
- 9) Explain the analogies of the United States as a melting pot and as a tossed salad discussed in the historical background section of this lesson.

The melting pot analogy is assimilation. It refers to various cultures coming together, losing their individuality, and becoming one culture. This is the absorption of the culture of a population or group into the culture of the dominant group.

The tossed salad analogy is acculturation. It refers to the belief that various cultures come together, change or modify as needed while keeping their individuality, and become part of a large mixture of cultures. In the process of acculturation one culture learns from another culture or cultures.

Ask the class which analogy they feel best represents their class and/or the United States, that of the melting pot or of the tossed salad. Can the class think of a better analogy than either of these?