

## H-11: The depth and breadth of multicultural

### The Depth and Breadth of "Multicultural"

This activity requires 35-50 minutes.

#### **Purpose:**

The Depth and Breadth of "Multicultural" is designed to engage students in a process of defining "culture" and examining its complexity. Often, especially in a class about multiculturalism or diversity, "culture" becomes synonymous with "race" or "ethnicity." This activity reveals the limitations of such a conceptualization and challenges the assumptions that are often made by educators about what students identify as the important strands of the "cultural" in "multicultural."

#### **Preparation:**

Preparation for this activity is very simple. You need only a chalkboard or large sheet of paper. At top, center, write "MULTICULTURAL." Make sure your students or workshop participants are positioned such that they can all see the chalkboard or paper.

#### **Instructions:**

This activity has several steps. Different combinations of these steps will be suitable for different audiences, from pre-K students to pre-service teachers. I will draw each step out individually:

1. **Defining "Multicultural".** Start by underlining the prefix "multi" and asking your students what this prefix means. Responses will include "many," "varied or various," "different," etc. Affirm all answers, then sum them up. This portion should take only a couple minutes. Next, move on to "cultural." What does this term mean? Encourage students to define "cultural" both in terms a dictionary-type definition and what it means to them individually.
2. **Drawing Out the Dimensions of "Cultural".** Tell the students you would like them to explore the understanding of "cultural" more deeply. Ask them to suggest all dimensions of culture they can think of, encouraging them to reflect on their own culture and the dimensions of that culture with which they identify. There are several effective ways of accomplishing this task. You can either have students call out these aspects of culture when they think of them (perhaps even using a student volunteer to list them under "MULTICULTURAL." You might also decide to simply go around the room, person by person, asking for suggestions.

There are literally endless dimensions to culture, and this will be reflected in the answers. It is likely that an influx of answers will come right away, then the rate of response will slow down considerably. This often happens after some of the more surface-level cultural aspects are suggested: music, food, etc. Prod the students to think a little more deeply about how they define their culture. Allow for some short silences, or suggest some deeper dimensions, including faith, religion, values, language, family structure, and others. It will be important to get as many suggestions for this list as possible. Be sure to note that this part of the activity could go on indefinitely, highlighting the complexity of "culture." Also, point out how intertwined some of the dimensions are, illustrating how simplistic it is to make a judgment about somebody based on one cultural dimension of the person. This step should take 10-15 minutes.

3. **What's Missing?** In my experience, 4 out of 5 times this activity is used, several interesting cultural dimensions are not mentioned by participants. Ironically, these are the very dimensions that are most often associated with multicultural education: race, gender, sexual orientation,

social class. Do NOT suggest these additions to the list, because if nobody suggests them, it leads to a wonderful conversation. If your class or workshop is one of the 4 (out of 5) that does not suggest one or more of these items, point this out and ask the participants why they didn't think of these dimensions. This will be an interesting introduction to the following steps, as you will see. It is often the case that when participants are suggesting items for the list from their own experience, and thus through how they define themselves, identifiers such as race, gender, etc. do not come directly to their minds. But, if they are suggesting items for the list based on how OTHERS define them, or how they define OTHERS, these items immediately come to mind.

4. **Categorizing List Items.** The next step is to divide the items into categories, which will make the final step of the exercise much easier. Indicate this intention to the group, and mention that you will be using Nitza Hidalgo's "three levels of culture." The citation for this model is:

Hidalgo, N. (1993). Multicultural teacher introspection. In Perry, T., and Fraser, J. (Eds.), *Freedom's plow: Teaching in the multicultural classroom*. New York: Routledge.

Hidalgo's levels include:

- a. **the Concrete:** This is the most visible and tangible level of culture, and includes the most surface-level dimensions such as clothes, music, food, games, etc. These aspects of culture are often those that provide the focus for multicultural "festivals" or "celebrations."
- b. **the Behavioral:** This level of culture clarifies how we define our social roles, the language(s) we speak, and our approaches to nonverbal communication. The Behavioral level REFLECTS our values. Aspects to be listed in this category include language, gender roles, family structure, political affiliation, and other items that situate us organizationally in society.
- c. **the Symbolic:** This level of culture includes our values and beliefs. It can be abstract, but it is most often the key to how individuals define themselves. It includes value systems, customs, spirituality, religion, worldview, beliefs, mores, etc.

Write short definitions for these levels on the board or sheet of paper you used to record the dimensions of culture. Review each of the categories for a couple of minutes. Give the participants an opportunity to consider further how they define themselves within these categories. Ask them to look over the categories and the items on the board for a few seconds. As a group, categorize all items into these categories. There may be some disagreement about where a certain item falls, so allow the same item to be listed under two categories.

5. **Consistency in Conceptualization.** After you have categorized the links, the next step is to facilitate a discussion about relatedness, importance, and the consistency of how individuals define themselves and others.

Starting with "the Concrete," proceed down the list of Hidalgo's categories, asking participants to raise their hands if they consider the items listed under that category to be the most important dimensions in how they define their own culture. Count the responses to each, and list them next to the category name on the board or paper. Be very clear that they are indicating what they consider to be important items for defining themselves, not the ways in which other people define them.

Sometimes, one or two students will choose "the Concrete" or "the Behavioral," but in virtually every case, a vast majority of the participants will choose "the Symbolic." As you discuss each category, ask those who chose it to describe why they did so, and encourage those who did not

choose it to explain why. Because most people will choose "the Symbolic," be sure to challenge them on why that is more important than the other levels.

After encouraging the participants to convince you that "the Symbolic" is the most important category, refer them back to the lists. Several questions will lead to interesting conversations:

- When you meet somebody, which of those items (under any of the categories) do you use to understand them culturally?
  - Is your attempt to understand others culturally consistent with how you want to be viewed and understood?
  - What forces in our society might contribute to our simplification of the culture of others, even though we don't want to be defined simplistically ourselves?
6. **Alternative Consistency in Conceptualization for Groups of Educators.** After recording how many participants define themselves most closely with the three categories, and facilitating the "why" discussion described above, turn to a conversation about education. Which of these categories do you, as an educator, focus on when you are trying to teach multiculturally? (This question will provide an "aha" moment for a lot of participants. Allow a few moments for that to happen.) How has education generally tried to be "multicultural"? What are the aspects or dimensions of culture that we focus on in our classrooms trying to be "multicultural"? Is this consistent with how we know people want to be defined?

This is especially powerful if you know that a certain school or district is stuck in the "additive" or "heroes and holidays" stage of multicultural development. Many schools have a multicultural festival or fair, and refer to that as "multicultural education."

7. **Wrapping Up.** To wrap up this exercise, you can lead to a discussion on how the participants might try to make their conceptualizations more consistent. Point out that this exercise is not meant to indict anyone, but rather to highlight how forces ranging from the media to our own education can sometimes move us backward when we think we are experiencing progress in self and social development. The conversations that happen as a result of this activity can last 10 minutes or over an hour, depending on what questions you ask and what direction you take.

#### **Facilitator Notes:**

As with the rest of these activities, it is vital in both the short run and the long run to validate the views of the participants. If they prefer to define themselves at the Concrete or the Behavioral level, do not challenge them directly about that. (This may happen with some younger participant groups.) This activity can make some participants feel vulnerable, and it is important not to intensify that to the point that they are no longer participating.

This activity has been especially valuable and successful with groups of active or pre-service TEACHERS because it helps to clarify multicultural education to some extent. Remember, there are multitudes of books on multicultural education out there that still present it as an additive approach or multicultural festival. This activity challenges educators to rethink such a simplification and their own "multicultural" teaching practices.

This activity also provides an excellent opportunity to weave in the idea of the link between critical pedagogy and multicultural teaching practices. The various steps bring out the diversity of cultural dimensions, just within the room of folks you are working with. This illustrates how the most important multicultural education resources are students themselves; and instead of trying to define what is culturally important to them through special celebrations or additive techniques, it is our responsibility to draw them into the conversation, allow them to define themselves, and use that as a starting point in the development of multicultural education.

Note: This activity was adapted from [\*Awareness Activities\*](#), part of the [\*Multicultural Pavilion Internet Project\*](#). Special thanks is extended to Bob Covert and the Multicultural Education team at the University of Virginia.