Unpack Your Cultural Baggage

Pre-field Activity (Facilitator Overview)

This activity created by Andrea Kiely (Former Associate Director, International Education, University of Georgia and Richard Kiely, Director, TA Program, Center for Teaching Excellence, Cornell University.

In the activity, students will create a suitcase full of “cultural baggage” in order to examine the assumptions they hold about their cultural identity. The activity is designed to help students think through their own cultural background, and to realize that their perspective is just as biased – but also just as unique – as any other cultural heritage. The exercise aims to uncover visible and invisible aspects of culture, and the complex nature of cultural identity. It also helps students realize that cultural diversity is neither static nor monolithic, but rather, a fluid and multifaceted aspect of each individual’s worldview.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How can we become more aware of our own worldview?
2. What are the dominant norms of your culture? Are there alternative or subcultures?
3. How does culture affect our beliefs, values, behaviors, and sense of self?
4. What different aspect of our culture do we identify with? What other cultural influences have an effect on our way of life?
5. What would it feel like to be a minority with your cultural identity? In what kind of culture would you be a minority? What would the lifestyle be like, and how would it affect you?

Leading Discussion:

- Once the group has had some time to think about and create their cultural baggage, ask for a volunteer to share an item that they wrote down. If there is more time, or if the group tends to be quiet in discussion, let students share with a partner before discussing in a big group.
- In discussion, ask for clarification about the meaning of specific items. Ask what it means to the individual and what role it plays in the individual’s life. (Example: What does it mean to be a Christian, a Southerner, a woman, an African-American, a mother, a patriot, a liberal, etc.)
- In discussion, consider alternative cultural identities to those described. For example, if an individual identifies as a southerner, what does it mean to be a northerner? Ask individuals how it feels to be a minority in a particular cultural landscape.
- This activity typically gives rise to lively discussion of the values, beliefs and assumptions that underlie aspect of culture. The discussion might also lead to a discussion of power relations among individuals and groups. The instructor/facilitator will need to be particularly sensitive to the group’s comfort level, individual’s defensiveness and or frustration.
- Conclude the activity by brainstorming how one might respond when confronted with values and assumptions that differ from one’s own.
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Instructions:

1. Make a list of 5-10 aspects of your individual culture or identity. Provide examples of visible and invisible aspects of culture and identity.
2. Create visual representations of each of these aspects to pack into your suitcase (see reverse).

Brainstorming the Baggage:

1. What kind of object can embody this aspect of culture?
2. How much room does each item take up in the suitcase? (How central is this item to your sense of self, your core beliefs, and your daily needs?)
3. What kind of thing is it?
   a. How much does this item affect the others?
   b. Does it spill over onto other items in the suitcase, or is it contained?
   c. Is it easily accessible and simple to maintain, or rare and reserved for special occasions?

Examples:

- a pair of shoes that have very little give
- a bulky sweater that can be squished to accommodate other items
- a bottle of shampoo that can spill all over everything else in your suitcase
- a pair of underwear--an essential that takes up very little room
- a pair of tweezers that you could easily do without or lose in your bag

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<th>Aspect, Quality</th>
<th>Relationship to/Influence on identity</th>
<th>Visual Representation</th>
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