

Teaching Note

My cultural backpack activity: A reflective teaching note

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The “My cultural backpack” activity is designed for teacher candidates (TCs) and in-service teachers as one of the projects for a culture class. The purpose of the activity is for TCs to examine their own culture to dispel the misconception that they do not have one of their own. Some TCs in the K-20 system still state, “I am white. I do not have a culture” (Garcia, 2002, p. 73); however, this notion needs reframing because teachers take their cultural self everywhere. In so doing, they may unintentionally discourage their students (e.g., emerging bilingual (EB) learners) from nurturing their own cultures and erase their own.

Thus, first and foremost, it is TCs (and teachers) who will benefit from knowing who they are. The activity was designed to support such (re)cognition of their cultural selves. The guidelines for the project read: “In Week 3, you will submit a ‘Cultural backpack,’ containing artifacts linked to what you consider to be your culture. The artifacts can be real objects, or you can draw them. Also, make sure to include some of your values, beliefs, and biases about EB learners. After having seen your peers’

cultural backpacks, write a one-page reflection stating what you will add to your cultural backpack if you were to present it again. Time for sharing: 5-7 minutes.”

This project appears not to be an easy one for TCs who are the norm (i.e., white, of middle class background, and monolingual). They always ask for more specific guidelines. They are initially challenged because they cannot simply check off a set of prescribed objects to include in their backpacks. It is when they are asked to read the definitions about culture that they begin to reflect and add ideas that reframe their previous ideas. Ultimately, TCs favor Grant’s and Sleeter’s (2007) definition of culture the most. Not only do they share their “surface” culture—defined as what is visible to any person (e.g., food, or dance)—but they also share their “deep” culture, which is defined as what is typically invisible to others (e.g., beliefs or concept of time). Both kinds of culture have been passed on to every person during their socialization processes (Park, & King, 2003).

As TCs open their backpack and share the objects, they (re)cognize that

each one of them has a culture of their own even though they initially claimed they did not have one. It is also at the sharing stage that TCs realize their similarities, differences, and uniqueness.

They (re)cognize their heritage, their origins, and what they have lost or gained in the assimilation or acculturation processes. When writing their reflections, they favor the acculturation process for their EB learners.

In general, most TCs face limited challenges when sharing their surface culture, but they experience some challenges when sharing their deep culture (e.g., their beliefs). One reason for this may be that they have not been encouraged to reflect on it. However, it is this kind of culture that educators need to examine deeply within teacher preparation. It is by realizing that these features vary from culture to culture

(e.g., ways of naming teachers, *Maestra[teacher]* as opposed to Mrs. Smith) that TCs can understand the cultural differences between them and their EB learners.

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The backpack is a metaphor of culture being visible and invisible to others, and there is a tendency to see only what is visible. However, it is not until TCs share their backpacks and welcome the scrutiny of their contents that the TCs understand the role of culture and its influence

on their worldviews.

Finally, this activity was designed for TCs and in-service teachers, but it can be adapted to any grade level. An adaptation could be to ask students to bring a brown bag, containing the objects that showcase who they are.

References

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