



Knowing Valuing and Shaping One's Culture



A PRECURSOR TO
ACKNOWLEDGING
ACCEPTING
AND RESPECTING
THE CULTURE
OF OTHERS



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As children we are naturally curious, yet suspicious and apprehensive when placed in different or unfamiliar environments. As we encounter cultural differences, we generally rely on our subconscious frames of reference to analyze, compare, and make judgments about the value and validity of other cultures and endeavor to continuously reinforce our embedded beliefs and perceptions about self and others (Allport, 1979; Erickson, 1997; Goodenough, 1987). That's what makes us as humans resourceful, creative, and adaptable but at the same time fearful and intolerant of others.

However, with our growing global economic and political interdependence, we must prepare our teacher candidates and future workforce to be morally cognizant of, genuinely respectful toward, and effectively prepared to appropriately interact with the diverse cultures they will encounter in a global society.

Brown (2004a), Haberman (1996), Ladson-Billings (1994), and Pang (2001) indicate that, to be effective, educators must possess the multicultural knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors that appropriately respond to issues of student diversity and cross-cultural acceptance and validation. Further, Banks (1997/2001), Brown (2005a), and Gay (2000) espouse that classroom teachers must be prepared to

recognize both hidden and overt biases within the educational system and advocate for equitable access to educational opportunity for all students.

Anderson (1990), Cushner et al. (2004), Howard (2002), and Zeichner and Hoeft (1996) state that equally important imperatives are that future teachers develop the skills and sensitivity to: become cultural brokers in their classrooms, embed global social justice paradigms in their curriculums, and facilitate the integration of equity and cross-cultural civility into the cognitive structures of their students' current and future selves.

However, studies conducted by Brown (2004b), Sleeter (2001), and Richardson (1996) found that most teacher candidates lack sufficient cross-cultural competence and sensitivity to appropriately address the complex needs of diverse student groups, and are less likely to be aware of the hidden biases within their school community or to acknowledge and build on the cultural capital that non-majority students bring to the classroom.

Brown (2005b), Gollnick and Chinn (2005), Howard (1999), and Sleeter (1995) indicate that to raise the cross-cultural cognizance and cultural diversity sensitivity of future teachers they must first be afforded the opportunity to objectively examine, reflectively clarify, and openly share the foundations of their own cultural frames of reference (e.g., class, ethnicity, gender, race, and religion). Further, this scrutiny should include the implicit and explicit shared beliefs, values, and behaviors

of their own cultural groups, the subjective concepts of self in relationship to these groups, and the values and characteristics one is willing to share with those outside of one's groups (Allen & Labbo, 2001; Allport, 1979; Brown, 2004c).

Allport (1979), Bennett (2003), Erickson (1997), Gollnick and Chinn (2005), and Goodenough (1987) contend that cultural frames of reference are imprinted early in life and subconsciously continue to evolve over the lifespan. Banks (2001), Brown (2005b), and Howard (1999) indicate that these cultural lenses dictate our self-concepts and determine how we value, respect, accept, and interact with others both within and outside of our micro-cultures and how we define ourselves in relation to the majority culture. Hence, a precursor to developing strong cross-cultural competencies is knowing, valuing, and sharing both the subconscious and conscious cultures of self (Banks, 2001; Bennett, 2003; Brown, 2005a; Goodlad & Mantle-Bromley, 2004; Howard, 1999).

To raise self-awareness, teacher educators such as Allen and Labbo (2001), Banks (2001), Brown (2004a), and Sleeter (1996) often initiate cultural diversity training with self-examination activities that require participants to examine their own cultural underpinnings as a precursor to exploring the cultures of others. By developing activities that engage students in examining the subconscious foundations of their beliefs, perceptions, and behaviors and then facilitating peer debriefings on how this subjective foundation influences

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their conscious approach to cross-cultural interaction often stimulates cross-cultural discussions and fosters positive changes in cross-cultural attitudes and behaviors (Banks, 2001; Giroux & Simon, 1989; Zeilchner & Hoefft, 1996).

The purpose of this article is to share a unique strategy (the cultural puzzle) used in graduate, undergraduate, and secondary education to assist students in examining and sharing their cultural heritage to: (1) raise their level of self-awareness, (2) increase cross-cultural communication, (3) improve authentic cross-cultural knowledge, and (4) create a cohesive classroom community. Over the past six years, university students' reflective journals, on-line and in-class discussions, and course evaluations indicate that the knowledge gained from the cultural puzzle activity is instrumental in establishing a sense of community that supports them as they strengthen bridges across cultural borders and develop techniques toward becoming equitable multicultural decision-makers.

The Cultural Puzzle

University students are required to develop a puzzle depicting how they came to be the person that they are today. In other words, what, how, and by whom was their current persona shaped? To insure that each puzzle is a true reflection of the student's heritage and is not influenced by the instructor, there is no lecture or individual introduction on the first day of class. Instead, the first class consists of a course overview and a hands-on seminar on using Blackboard as a communication tool.

The instructions given for the puzzle assignment include: (1) each participant must conduct family interviews that include their current generation (e.g., siblings, cousins, extended family, foster family), at least two from the previous generation (e.g., parents, aunts/uncles, primary caregivers) and where possible two from at least two generations prior (e.g., grandparents, great grandparents, extended family, friends); (2) the cultural findings may be portrayed in any medium, form, or material they select; (3) students must share their puzzles in 3-4-minute self introductions during the following class; and (4) the assignment must be completed by class time the following week. These requirements provide a justifiable reason for questioning sometimes resistant family members about cultural traditions, encourage creativity and ownership in the process, promote and sustain a sense of class community and minimize student procrastination.

To assist in identifying the various micro-cultures that influence their cultural frames of reference, students are directed to two of the required texts used in the course: *Cultural Diversity in a Pluralistic Society* by D. Gollnick and P. Chinn (2000/2005) and *Cultural Diversity and Education: Foundations, Curriculum, and Teaching* by J. Banks (2001/2005). Students may use the categories found in these texts, add other micro-cultures, and delete or otherwise modify the categories.

Throughout the six years that the cultural puzzle has been a requirement, no student has produced a puzzle resembling how I envisioned the activity. See Figure 1 for my vision of a cultural puzzle. The shape and form of student puzzles usually represents something that has significance to their personal histories. Puzzles have been characterized as animals (e.g., cow, turtle, and rooster), plants (e.g., tree, flower, and garden) and objects (e.g., hammer, car, quilt, and crossword puzzle).

The creativity, commitment, and ingenuity of the students far exceed my expectations. See Figures 2 and 3 for examples of puzzles developed by university students. A Hawaiian music major gave a power point presentation showing important people and places in Hawaiian life that influenced him (e.g., home, family members, and church). He narrated the presentation in the three languages

prominent in his Hawaiian culture and used Hawaiian music in the background.

The interdependence of the four puzzle objectives is evident in reflective journals, online discussions, and in-class interactions. Students often connect their willingness to engage in cross-cultural discussions and activities with their increased awareness of self and classmates. Augmenting and sharing accurate cross-cultural knowledge is attributed to engaging in receptive cross-cultural dialogue. The increased level of awareness, sensitivity, and communication encourages the development of a supportive class community.

Raising Self-Awareness

The intent of the self-awareness objective is to: (1) facilitate an awareness that family structures and values are significant influences on self-concepts, cross-cultural relationships, aspirations, and world-views; (2) foster an understanding of the correlation between one's various micro-cultures (e.g., gender, religion, race, and social class) and how one perceives and interacts with others; and (3) explore the influence of the majority culture on one's concepts of self as a member of the dominant or non-dominant culture.

The process of developing and exploring this information is a valuable tool that I use throughout the course as a foundation and reference to assist students in under-

Figure 1. My vision of a cultural puzzle.

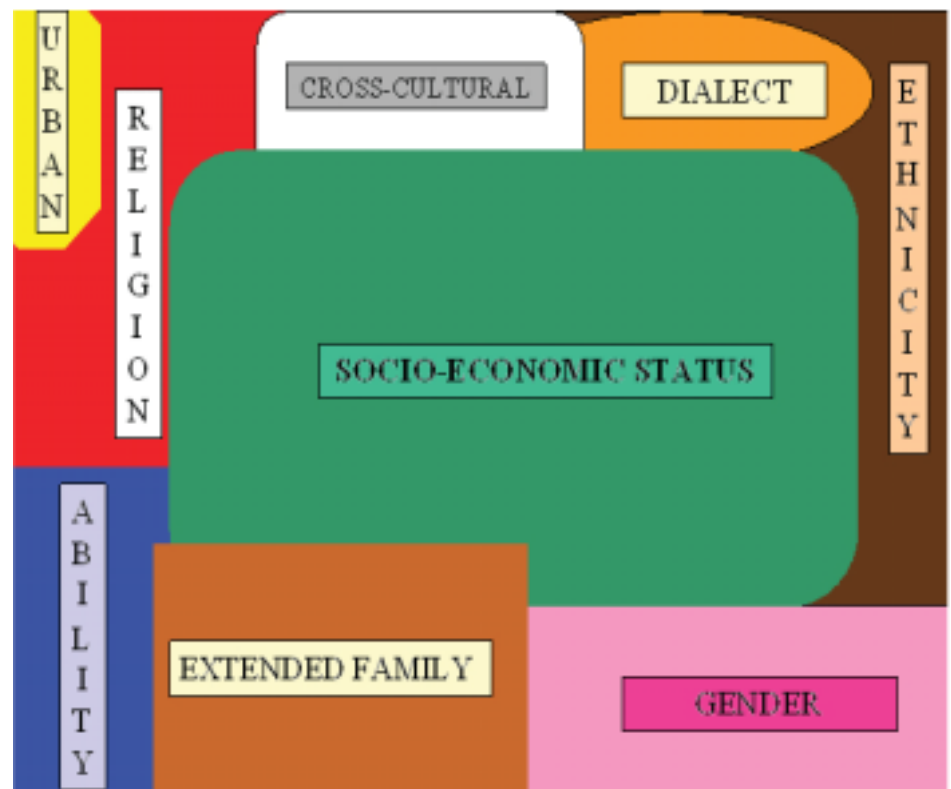


Figure 2



standing their attitudes and behaviors and in expanding their world-views to become more effective professionals, better citizens, and more attuned to our increasing global interdependence.

Increasing Cross-Cultural Communication

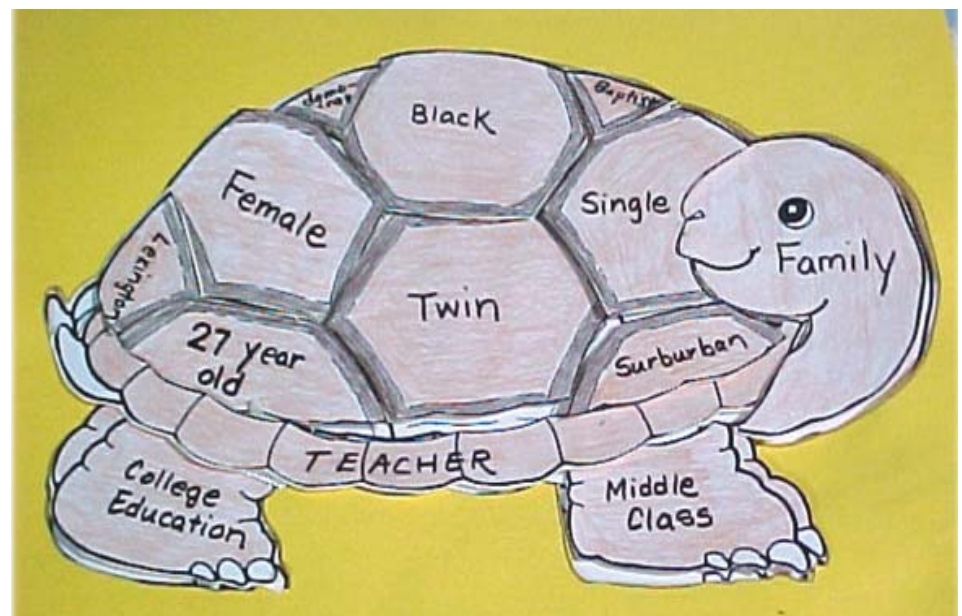
The purpose of the increasing cross-cultural communication objective is to: (1) augment student in-class participation in cross-cultural group discussions; (2) encourage students to collaborate with peers outside of their comfort zones; and (3) stimulate candid on-line discussions dealing with current issues.

By sharing cultural heritages through the puzzle activity participants illustrate how they developed their differing ways of understanding the world without feeling that their privacy is being invaded. As the class views and listens to each other they become sensitive to the customs, histories, struggles, and perceptions of peers and how these histories are related to their own. As students tell personal stories, others often find that first impressions are unreliable; the "inner" self is far more complex and revealing than "outsiders" can fathom and that it just may be safe to share their personal views with peers outside of their cultural group.

The course uses Blackboard as an on-

going on-line discussion tool. Each student is required to participate in a minimum of one on-line discussion per week. Dialogues are initiated by the students and usually begin as a continuation of in-class discussions, a personal reflection on class activities, or with a topic on current diversity issues found in the media. Often students attach articles and links for classmates

Figure 3



to read and respond to. After the first two weeks, I found that most students logged on daily and responded to the postings by addressing peers by name.

Improve Authentic Cross-Cultural Knowledge

The purpose of the improving authentic cross-cultural knowledge objective is to: (1) dispel cultural myths; (2) raise students' cross-cultural verbal and nonverbal communication skills; and (3) assist in developing culturally relevant teaching and classroom management strategies.

As the comfort level rises and students feel safe in the classroom environment, they begin to raise questions about their beliefs and search for information about the attitudes and behaviors of those outside of their cultural group. Throughout the semester students seek information and share personal experiences that were previously considered too sensitive to openly discuss across cultural borders (e.g., family and cultural traditions, discipline strategies for diverse students, religious canons, social issues, appropriate cross-cultural parent/teacher contact, personal hair and skin care, student/teacher cross-cultural interactions, and understanding cross-cultural verbal and nonverbal cues).

Students use the on-line discussion board and in-class small group discussions to seek peer assistance in resolving issues that arise in their professional and personal lives, to debate current events, editorials, or social and political commentary, and seek to understand the underlying cultural reasoning behind different attitudes and behaviors.

Building a Cohesive Class Community

The objective of building class community is to: (1) develop a safe and supportive class environment; (2) foster open, respectful, and genuine in-class interaction across cultural borders; (3) encourage students to consider participating in cross-cultural group activities, discussions, and research projects; and (4) promote post-class student instituted congenial discussions on litigious topics.

As students enter class on the first day, I find that most sit in their comfort zones (with those that look like them, exhibit similar communication styles and speech patterns, and/or were reared in the same region). Surprisingly, gender is not a factor in how students initially group themselves. After the cultural puzzle presentations, many students realign themselves by sitting with classmates who share their interests and concerns rather than their physical characteristics and dialect. They are more respectful of each others' opinions, seek and provide authentic cross-cultural information, eagerly hold on-line and after-class discussions, and join in social activities together. Classmates become friends rather than just peers enrolled in the same course.

Prior to instituting the cultural puzzle activity, I assigned students to groups to insure cross-cultural interaction and diverse perspectives on research projects. After initiating the cultural puzzle activity, I find that students reach out to peers across cultural borders and form collaborative partnerships for field experiences and research projects on their own. They often seek out group partners based on their diverse perspectives, which make for well integrated groupings without instructor intervention.

In midpoint evaluations, most students indicate that the puzzle activity helped them become more sensitive to the perspectives of others, more open to engaging in cross-cultural activities, and eager to broaden their cross-cultural worldview by incorporating other perspectives into their own schemas. By semester's end, I find that most students reach a higher level of comfort in cross-cultural settings, exhibit a willingness to negotiate a middle ground on cross-cultural issues, and often encourage each other to engage in social justice activities in their communities and schools.

Because the goal of the cultural puzzle is different for secondary students, the timing of its introduction and presentation is reversed. The activity is presented as a culminating project to give students time

to become familiar with the mentoring experience, comfortable with their mentors, and to develop cross-cultural allies and friends among their peers.

Secondary Students

In secondary education, the threefold intent of the cultural puzzle activity is to: (1) alleviate some of the stress, anxiety, and isolation felt by many non-majority and first-generation American students within their school environment; (2) raise student self-esteem; and (3) build a sense of belonging within the school community.

The secondary students are assigned the activity during the seventh week of a ten-week interaction with teacher candidate mentors in an urban high school. This gives the students time to establish a comfortable relationship with their mentors and to meet and socially interact with other mentees outside of their cultural groups.

The cultural puzzle is used as the culminating project to give the secondary students a sense of power and pride in determining how and to what degree they will share their histories and to demonstrate the value of the cultural capital that diverse secondary students bring to the school environment.

First-generation immigrant and refugee students are asked to develop puzzles sharing their memories of home and family, describing what they miss most, their perceptions of life in America, and their future dreams. Non-foreign-born students are asked to develop puzzles describing their families and communities, who and what has influenced them the most, and their future goals and desires. All students may ask their mentors for guidance but must complete the project on their own within the allotted two weeks.

As with the university students, each secondary student makes a formal presentation of the puzzle to their peers and mentors during a culminating brunch. However, to minimize the anxiety associated with speaking and sharing in front of adults and classmates, secondary students are not given presentation time constraints.

There are no restrictions on the size, shape, or form the students choose for their puzzles. I or their mentors provide materials when needed. Most secondary participants use pictures (e.g., family, friends, homes, neighborhoods, and countries) to share their histories. However, many refugee students arrive with no photographs and/or only remnant artifacts of the homes they left behind and families that have been scattered to other countries.

Some of these students are so trauma-

tized by their experiences that they cannot share their histories, others cry during their presentations, and some express guilt about surviving where friends and family have perished. To assist refugee students who may not have strong English-language skills or who may falter during their presentations, friends or their mentor will stand with them to provide moral support and clarify or interpret where necessary. Many of the teacher candidate mentors are visibly moved as they listen to these histories and observe the affect on both refugee students and American-born students.

The puzzles of both majority and non-dominant culture American-born mentees consistently show family and friends in positive situations (e.g., engaged in fun activities, "hanging out" in the neighborhood, or at family and community gatherings). Though some students have experienced trauma in their lives (e.g., death, illness, drugs, or violence), none choose to include it in their puzzles but may mention an incident during their presentation. However, if a favorite family member, friend, or pet has moved away or died they will include their picture.

Most puzzles also contain pictures of places the student has been or would like to visit, famous people perceived as role models and heroes, and careers they aspire to pursue. See Figures on page 11 for examples of puzzles developed by secondary students. The following excerpts are from teacher candidate mentors' reflective journals immediately following secondary student presentations.

"I can't imagine what some of these kids have had to endure. ... some of their puzzles brought me to tears. No wonder they don't adjust as quickly as we think they should. Who cares about math when you still have nightmares about surviving one more day?"

"I know some of these kids have never been out of the city and don't have the money to participate in stimulating summer activities... as I watched them tell their stories, I saw a wealth of rich and powerful family experiences that could be incorporated in my lessons."

"The mentees showed me how magnificent life can be no matter where you fit on the economic scale. Also, no matter what kids go through, the human spirit can thrive if we just take the time to nurture it."

"I was surprised as how the kids would help each other with their presentations when one got stuck with language, started to cry, or was afraid to present. Even though they were from different places and had different experiences ... they showed great compassion for each other. We can learn a lot from kids."

"I marveled at the pride all of these kids have in their heritage and how surprised they were that we wanted them to share their cultures with us as we shared ours with them."

Conclusions

In conclusion, I would like to reflect on the research and practices of Banks (2001), Brown (2004a), Haberman (1996), Howard (1999), and Sleeter (1995) which indicate that developing self-examination activities such as the cultural puzzle will: (1) engage students in exploring the subconscious underpinnings of their beliefs, perceptions, and behaviors; (2) facilitate debriefings, peer discussions, and reflections on why these attitudes and behaviors influence their conscious approach to cross-cultural interaction; (3) enlighten participants on how their actions influence the behaviors and attitudes of others; and (4) lay the foundation for building cross-cultural competence and social justice advocacy in educators and students. Using the cultural puzzle as a self-examination tool:

1. Allows participants to scrutinize the subconscious roots of their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. This examination and recognition are precursors to acknowledging, accepting, and respecting the cultures of others;
2. Provides a safe venue to facilitate self-disclosure through the sharing of cultural heritages without the perception of invading one's privacy or making judgments about others. Participants only share what they want others to know;
3. Encourages relinquishment of the natural affinity to congregate and associate within the safety of one's own cultural group namely those that look and or speak alike;
4. Stimulates human curiosity about those outside of one's cultural frames of reference, facilitates the transmission of authentic cross-cultural knowledge, and broadens the world view of all participants; and
5. Affords an excellent segue into the deeper cross-cultural training necessary to prepare our students and educators for the interdependence of a global society.

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All illustrations featured with this article are photographs of cultural puzzles created by Elinor L. Brown and her students. Two of the photographs appeared previously in the *Journal of Technology in Teacher Education*.