



Understanding the Depth and Breadth of "Multicultural"

The Depth and Breadth of "Multicultural" is designed to engage participants in a process of defining "culture" and examining its complexities. Particularly indicated to work with students.

Module	Submodules	Group size	Duration
• Awareness	• Intercultural Aspects	• Small group	• 1 hour minimum

Keywords

defining culture, multiculturalism

Aims

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 often made by educators about what students identify as the important strands of the "cultural" in "multicultural."

Participants

No number is defined.

Description

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. It is composed by 7 steps.

Material

chalkboard or large sheet of paper

Method

This activity has several steps. Different combinations of these steps will be suitable for different audiences:

1. Defining "multicultural". Start by underlining the prefix "multi" and asking participants what this prefix means. Responses will include "many," "varied or various," "different," and so on. Affirm all answers, then summarize. This portion should take only a couple minutes. Next, move on to "-cultural." What does this term mean? Encourage participants to define "cultural" both in terms of what they believe a dictionary-type definition would be and what it means to them individually.

2. Tell participants 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 cultures and the dimensions of that culture with which they identify. There are several effective ways of accomplishing this task. You can have students call out these aspects of culture when they think of them (perhaps even using a student volunteer to list them under "MULTICULTURAL"). Or you might decide simply to go around the room, person by person, asking for suggestions--one way to invite every voice into the conversation.

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 considerably. This often happens after some of the more surface-level cultural aspects are suggested: music, food, and so on. Prod participants to think more deeply about how they define their cultures. Allow for some short silences or suggest some deeper dimensions such as faith, religion, values, language, family structure, and others. It will be important to collect 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 judgement about somebody based on one cultural dimension. This step should take 10-15 minutes.

3. What's not there? Experiences show that several interesting cultural or identity dimensions generally are not mentioned by participants. Ironically, these are the very dimensions that most often are associated with multiculturalism, diversity, and related topics: race, gender, sexual orientation, social class. Do *not* suggest these additions to the list; if nobody suggests them an opportunity for an important conversation emerges. 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 why the participants didn't think of these dimensions. This will be an interesting introduction to the following steps, as you will see. It's often the case that when participants are suggesting items for the list from their own experiences, and thus through how they define themselves, race, gender, and so on, don't come directly to their minds. But, if they're suggesting items for the list based on how *others* define them, or how they define *others*, these items do 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:

1. 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, and so on. These aspects of culture are often those which provide the focus for multicultural "festivals" or "celebrations."
2. the Behavioral: This level of culture clarifies how we define our social roles, the language 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 situation us organizationally in society.
3. the Symbolic: This level of culture includes our values and beliefs. It can be abstract, but it is most often the most important level in terms of how individuals define themselves. It includes value systems, customs, spirituality, religion, worldview, beliefs, mores, and so on.

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 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 considerations for how they define their own cultures. 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 important items for defining *themselves*, not the ways in which other people define them.

Sometimes, one or two participants 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.

Here comes the "aha" moment...

After discussing why "the Symbolic" is the most important category for most people, refer them back to the lists. Several questions will lead to interesting conversation:

- 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 others' cultures, 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 might facilitate a discussion on how the participants can work to make the consistency of their conceptualizations more...consistent. Point out that this

exercise is not meant to indict anyone, but instead to highlight how forces ranging from the media to our own educations can move us backwards 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.

Advice for Facilitators

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 no longer are participating.

This activity has been especially valuable and successful with groups of active or pre-service teachers or those who work at non-profits that do a lot of "diversity" programming because it helps to clarify multiculturalism to some extent. Remember, there are multitudes of books and conversations about multiculturalism that still present it as an additive approach or multicultural festival. This activity challenges participants to rethink such a simplification and their own "multicultural" practices.

This activity also provides an excellent opportunity to introduce the link between critical pedagogy and multicultural teaching. The process highlights the dimensions of diversity and culture within the room of folks with whom you are working. This illustrates how the most important multicultural resources are the participants 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, and allow them to define themselves.

Source (APA)

<http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/activities/multicultural.html>

Handouts

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Understanding the Depth and Breadth of "Multicultural". Retrieved Sunday January 11, 2026, from :

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Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme



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