

2015

## "Create-A-Culture: An Experiential Approach To Cross Cultural Communication Dynamics

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### Recommended Citation

Plummer, Evelyn (2015) ""Create-A-Culture: An Experiential Approach To Cross Cultural Communication Dynamics," *Proceedings of the New York State Communication Association*: Vol. 2014, Article 3.

Available at: <http://docs.rwu.edu/nyscaproceedings/vol2014/iss1/3>

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# Create-a-Culture: An experiential approach to cross cultural communication dynamics

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This small group activity uses a pseudo-simulation approach to explore dynamics of enculturation, acculturation, third culture, and diaspora and the resulting influences upon cross-cultural communication competence. All human communication contexts are influenced by perceptual patterns which, in turn, are shaped by culture-based norms and views. Furthermore, as asserted by E.T. Hall, significant linkages exist between a group's cultural influences and its communication practices. This guided, collaborative learning exercise also draws on the inherent diversity within the students' personal cultural backgrounds and previous culture-based studies as they work together to create new (hypothetical) co-cultural groups. Through this multi-step exercise, students "experience" the long term processes by which a group develops its culture—as manifested in its observable elements, values, and contextual sensibilities. Students are encouraged to use their imaginations as informed by their historical, geographical, and anthropological knowledge in order to consider beyond their own personal cultural realities. This activity, which can be adjusted to a wide variety of class sizes and session-lengths, accomplishes several additional pedagogical objectives, including: collaborative learning, exploration of culture-based principles, and the application of systems theory to human communication practices (input-throughput-output).

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## Activity description

This activity is applicable to a wide range of courses since all human communication contexts are influenced by patterns of perception which, in turn, are shaped by culture-based norms and views. Cultural and co-cultural influences derive from a wide range of group identifications extending far beyond the more commonly considered distinctions of nationality and ethnicity. Students are encouraged to observe that patterns of "culture" also can be found in gender, age, organizations, social class, belief systems, etc.

## *Pedagogical Rationale*

The core goal of this Great Idea For Teaching Students is to foster skills of cross cultural communication competence. It utilizes a pseudo-simulation approach to teaching the unit on culture and communication by means of a guided exploration into the processes of Enculturation, Acculturation, Third Culture, and Diaspora. Students simulate the experiences of (1) growing up and being shaped by cultural and co-cultural influences (2) exposure to the norms and practices of a new culture via role-playing immigration and emigration, and (3) accomplishing shared meaning and functioning across the cultures by discovering commonalities between one's own original group and the "other" group.

The collaborative learning approach also draws on the inherent diversity within the groupings themselves. In a synergistic way, students who actually have traveled and/or represent different groups can enhance the class's general knowledge base as the teams ground their choices in geographic and cultural reality. Throughout the interactions and the debriefings, students are encouraged to note the linkages between how a group constructs its representative artifacts, reinforces its preferred behavioral norms, and handles its communication cues—implicitly or explicitly. In addition, the hands-on nature of the activity encourages a pragmatic understanding of cultural dimensions.

### **Procedure**

This activity can be adjusted to a wide variety of class sizes and session-lengths. However, in order to provide maximum opportunity for exploration, diverse inputs and adequate “travel time”, I usually aim for four-five small groups (the co-cultures to be created) and allow three-four class sessions for completing the several interactive steps in the process (see ♦ below). The initial forming of groups, distribution of materials, and presentations of results should occur as part of an in-class workshop structure, but the flexibility exists for additional collaborations to occur outside of class.

1. Assign appropriate readings on culture, diversity, and cross cultural communication from textbook and/or supplementary materials.
2. Divide students into small teams (usually done randomly).
3. ♦ **CREATE A CULTURE [Enculturation]:**  
Distribute worksheets containing specific questions for teams to answer about their jointly-created culture. Ideally, the phrasing will match the terminology and categorizations used by the assigned textbook and supplementary materials. (see attached for sample)
4. Upon completion of the worksheets, each team takes five minutes to introduce itself to the class by explaining highlights from its worksheet answers. In addition, the instructor can use this part of the activity to clarify terms and concepts. Each team is then “charged” with bringing in one of their co-cultural artifacts to the next class.
5. ♦ **TRAVEL THE WORLD [Acculturation]:**  
The instructor selects one individual from each team to go “visiting” and join another culture. The traveler’s goal is to learn enough about the new culture in order to function in that environment (work, eat, converse, frolic, etc.) For each host co-culture, the members’ goal is to prepare the newcomer to become “one-of-us”.
6. ♦ **LIVING IN THE OVERLAP [Third Culture]:**  
As in real world encounters, parties communicate with each other in that area of overlap where they share sufficient commonalities (e.g. language coding, belief, values, etc). In this part of the activity travelers are asked if they wish to stay in the new culture. In other words, are there are sufficient items of overlap in order to maintain amicable interaction? Similarly, the co-cultural groups reveal how willing they are to embrace the potential newcomer. Interestingly, travelers often elect to return home. Either way, a discussion ensues exploring humans’ imperative to group

themselves according to perceived similarities, although that similarity may or may not be connected to outward markers such as race or nationality.

When travelers choose to emigrate and stay in the new culture, it provides an opportunity to explain “diaspora”, a prevalent societal dynamic and an increasingly ubiquitous term which is rarely familiar to students. This pattern of cultural dispersion is particularly evident when teams bring in music or visual arts as their representative cultural artifact in step four.

7. Upon completion of the general discussion, students are asked to contemplate the follow up question: *“What [if anything] is the most significant thing I learned from the first 2 steps of the Create-A-(Co) Culture activity?”*

### **Typical results**

Students become more engaged when involved in such a context-specific, task-driven approach. In addition, the collaborative workshop atmosphere increases synergy, creativity, and error correction (e.g. when a group’s selected recreational activities don’t match its geographical limitations.) One challenge in the activity, which also can be considered a benefit, is encouraging students to think beyond their own personal cultural realities to imagine and “experience” the long term processes by which a group develops its culture—as manifested in its elements, values, and contextual sensitivities.

In post-activity debriefing discussions, students have offered such insights as:

- ❑ Feeling similar is a stronger imperative than appearing similar—which sometimes leads people toward other cultures—not their group of origin.
- ❑ A culture’s elements, values, and contexts are connected, and all must be considered in order to understand and communicate with a given cultural group.
- ❑ Respect the people and the culture—during both enculturation and acculturation.
- ❑ There can be significant difference and diversity even for geographically adjacent groups.

### **References**

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- Hofstede, G. (1980a). Motivation, leadership, and organization: Do American theories apply abroad? *Organizational Dynamics* (9), 42–63.

## Sample worksheet handouts 1 & 2

Worksheet #1 - Questions for defining the (co)culture

### *Living in "Our Culture"*

[You will need an imagination to complete this activity!]

You & your group members are creating your own co-cultural group, which will be known as \_\_\_\_\_.

[Select one: VERDANA / GARAMOND / SIMSUN / TAHOMA / TUNGA] [your choice]

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**Step 1: Review definition of a "culture" in your textbook.**

**Step 2: Answer the following questions:**

What is the larger general geographic area within which your co-culture exists?

\_\_\_\_\_ (write in)

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**Our "ELEMENTS"** {Aligned with Beebe, et al., 2014, which corresponds with Hofstede}

1. What is the most popular spare time activity in your co-culture?
2. What one item does virtually everyone in your culture own?
3. How do you educate your young?
4. Are there any rules of behavior in your culture? If so, how are they enforced?
5. Do most of the people in your culture believe in **CHI**? In a higher power? In the existence of life on other planets? [an insight into your culture's *ways-of-knowing*]
6. How do people in your culture generally explain why half of the day is in light and the other half is in darkness? [an insight into your culture's *ways-of-knowing*]
7. Are music and dance a part of your culture and if so, what types/styles?
8. How do your people primarily communicate with each other: via alphabetic writing / ideographic characters / symbols / gestures?

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**Our “VALUES”** {Aligned with Beebe, et al., 2014, which corresponds with Hofstede}

9. In your culture, is it considered better to be assertive or passive?
10. In your culture, do people prefer to have concrete knowledge about what is happening or are they more comfortable with just “going with the flow”?
11. In your culture, do people prefer the *supreme ruler* approach (i.e. accepting that only a few people should have the political power?)
12. In your culture, how important is it to do your own personal thing? How important is it to collaborate and do what’s best for the group as a whole?
13. Who has more influence in your culture: men or women?
14. In your culture, what would be considered a successful life accomplishment?

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**Our “CONTEXTS”** {Aligned with Beebe, et al., 2014, which corresponds with Hofstede}

15. Which statement best represents your culture’s style:
  - a. Our language contains various emotion-laden words that we can use to praise/insult others.
  - b. Our language doesn’t use words with any inherent emotional meaning. If you want to communicate praise or insult, it’s all in the intonation you use and the *WAY* you say any words.
16. In communicating with each other, do the people in your culture pay a lot of attention to the “non-verbals”?
17. When communicating, does the environment (i.e. *WHERE* something is said) have an effect on the way meaning is interpreted?
18. How explicitly do your people express themselves? [on a scale of 1-10]

Worksheet #2 - For each person to keep track of the co-created answers.

**Write your answers on this sheet**

|                               |  |
|-------------------------------|--|
| <b>Our (co)CULTURE'S NAME</b> |  |
| <b>Our "ELEMENTS":</b>        |  |
| <b>Our "VALUES":</b>          |  |
| <b>Our "CONTEXTS":</b>        |  |