

PART I: DEFINING CULTURE



The nsima looks like mashed potatoes and you take a piece of it and roll it in your hand, indent it with your thumb, and scoop the meat or soup. I am still learning and usually have more food on my face and arms than in my stomach. Today I helped kill a chicken for the first time. It is supposed to be an honor, so I tried, but it made me feel sad. Then we plucked the feathers and are going to cook it. Very different from America's way of eating chicken!

- Emily Harker⁶



We're all on the same planet together, breathing the same air. We're all living in the same community.

- Dan Barutta⁷

These two statements, one from a Peace Corps Volunteer during her first year of service and the other from a Returned Volunteer 14 years after his experience, speak volumes about the challenges and benefits of global education. Peace Corps Volunteers and other cross-cultural sojourners often begin their journeys thinking about differences, then return home understanding our similarities. Along the way they learn about culture—the daily living patterns and the most deeply held beliefs that a group of people have in common.

According to Ina Corinne Brown in *Understanding Other Cultures*:

*... no custom, belief or behavior can be understood out of its social or cultural context. That is, any item of behavior, any tradition or pattern, can be evaluated correctly only in the light of its meaning to the people who practice it, its relation to other elements of the culture, and the part it plays in the adaptation of the people to their environment or to one another. No custom is "odd" to the people who practice it.*⁸



Even younger students can appreciate the “normalcy” of cultural practices different from their own when they examine these within a framework that links the many factors (e.g., geography, history, belief systems) influencing cultural norms rather than study the practices as isolated oddities.

Cultures are systems of behaviors and customs passed from one generation to the next. The rules, language, religion, family systems, recreation, and education that a group of people share provide predictability and safety in their daily lives. When people are bound together by common beliefs and practices, they understand each other and the world around them has meaning.

As Brown suggests, a culture is a complex and evolving pattern of life, rooted in tradition as well as place. Culture is indelibly a part of each person's identity, but individuals also influence culture. It defines how we see ourselves and how we perceive others. How can we, then, ever understand a culture other than our own? One way is to view differences through a neutral framework that organizes cultural traits around a set of common functions. Over the years anthropologists have developed lists of cultural universals, or functions, that are found in some form in every culture on earth. For example, all cultures have customs and habits related to food. Peace Corps Volunteer Emily Harker's host may slaughter her own chicken while a U.S. family buys a precooked bird from a local fast-food restaurant, but each action has the same function—to acquire food.



The first activity in this section is designed to help students understand the concept of culture. The second familiarizes students with a list of cultural features that can be used as a guide for exploring differences and similarities among groups. These activities have not been assigned specific grade levels because they offer important background for cultural studies at all levels. We recommend that people using this guide adapt these activities to meet the abilities of their students and incorporate them early in their teaching about culture.

The other lessons in this section will provide students with opportunities to reflect on the cultural patterns that shape their perceptions.

Activities are included to help students develop awareness of the many groups to which they belong and to build appreciation for the diverse cultures that share the planet.

Endnotes

⁶ Emily Harker served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Zambia from 1996 to 1998. This comment is taken from her correspondence with students at Eisenhower Middle School in Morristown, Pennsylvania.

⁷ Dan Barutta served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Jamaica from 1981 to 1983. This comment is taken from an interview with him in March 1997.

⁸ Brown, Ina Corinne, *Understanding Other Cultures* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall/Simon and Schuster, 1963), p. 140.

⁹ Adapted from *Promoting Harmony: A Compilation of Sample Lessons, Grades K-12* (Brooklyn: New York City Board of Education, 1992), by permission of the Board of Education of the City of New York.

¹⁰ Adapted from *Culture Matters: The Peace Corps Cross-Cultural Workbook* (Washington, D.C.: Peace Corps, 1997), a book of activities designed to help Peace Corps Volunteers adapt to and understand the people of their host countries.

¹¹ Lisa Buchwalder served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Mongolia from 1993 to 1995. This comment is taken from a letter she wrote to her World Wise Schools class in the U.S. dated November 9, 1994.

¹² Adapted from *HOT TOPICS: Usable Research: Appreciating Differences: Teaching and Learning in a Culturally Diverse Classroom* by Evelyn Ploumis-Devick, Ph.D., with Joseph Follman (South Eastern Regional Vision for Education, 1993).

¹³ The original version of this lesson appears in *Lessons From Africa: A Supplement to Middle School Courses in World Cultures, Global Studies, and World Geography*, Merry M. Merryfield, editor (Bloomington, Indiana: ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, 1989).

¹⁴ Adapted with permission from *Diversity Simulation Games* by Sivasailam Thiagarajan, (Amherst, Massachusetts: HRD Press, 1995).

¹⁵ Kristyn Leftridge served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Morocco from 1990 to 1992.

¹⁶ Additional "Hello Data" is available on the internet at the Peace Corps web site under "Volunteer Views" at <<http://www.peacecorps.gov/www/dp/wws1.html>>.

¹⁷ Michelle Fisher served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Lithuania from 1993 to 1995.

¹⁸ Adapted with permission from *Diversity Simulation Games* by Sivasailam Thiagarajan.

¹⁹ Reprinted from *Peace Corps Times*, Number 2, 1995, p. 17.

²⁰ Reprinted from *Peace Corps Times*, Number 2, 1995, p. 36.