Class Activities

# Chapter 14: Individual Differences in Cognition

## 1. What Is a Culture?

A culture is typically defined as a group of people who share similar attitudes, customs, beliefs, and behaviors. The purpose of this activity is for students to work in groups to identify the various cultures that exist on your college campus. Regardless of the size of your campus, students should be able to identify many groups including Greek organizations, athletic teams, religious groups, academic teams and clubs, and even faculty and administration.

Distribute handout 14-1 to each student and have them list a unique culture on your campus in each of the three boxes. Then, have them define the culture by listing three attitudes, customs, beliefs, or behaviors on the lines that make the cultures a culture. Last, have them look at their culture diagrams. Are they mutually exclusive? Do they share any common traits? This can be used to generate a discussion about cultures and whether they are more different than similar, or vice versa.

Handout 14-1

Culture 1

Culture 3

Culture 2

## 2. Understanding Cultural Diversity

Each of us is guilty of being ethnocentric. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to understand how someone from another culture may perceive a situation. To help students realize that perception is indeed in the eye of the beholder, perform this simple but effective activity. You will need 3 – 5 volunteers, blindfolds for each (or you can ask them to just shut their eyes) and a sheet of construction paper for each volunteer.

With their eyes closed, give the students verbal instructions about how to fold, manipulate and tear the sheet of construction paper. You will want there to be at least 10 steps (i.e., fold it in half, now turn it 90 degrees clockwise and fold again, now tear the right corner, now fold the left corner, etc.) At the end, you’ll ask them to open their eyes. They, and the rest of the class, will see that no two students’ paper look the same despite getting the same instructions. This will demonstrate that our perception is unique and subjective and to say that one culture is right or wrong is inaccurate.

(source: <http://www2.cortland.edu/offices/advisement-and-transition/cor-101/goals-objectives/diversity.dot>)

## 3. Cognitive Differences Between Experts and Novices

The purpose of this demonstration is to illustrate how experts and novices differ in how they approach certain tasks. You can approach this in a couple of different ways:

1) Chess Exercise

For this exercise, you will need to recruit two volunteers who are willing to play a game of chess during class for their peers to observe. The first volunteer must be very familiar with the game of chess, and the second should be someone who is not familiar with the game at all. A week before the class demonstration, distribute instructions for how to play chess to each volunteer (the expert will not need them, obviously, but it’s always good practice to control variables). This will allow the novice to become somewhat familiar with the game, its pieces and its rules, without actually having played the game.

Then, have the two students play a game of chess in class. As each player contemplates a move, have them identify the possible moves they can make. The demonstration should reveal that the expert can not only identify more potential moves but can also beat the novice in a relatively short period of time.

2) Marshmallow Exercise

The goal of the marshmallow exercise is to create the tallest possible tower in 18 minutes using a yard of string, a yard of tape, a marshmallow and 20 pieces of spaghetti. The inventor of this challenge states that young children perform this task much better than adult executives because the adults’ experience has made them to think in a more rigid way. If you can find a group of young kids (maybe borrow them from some colleagues) and a group of executives (maybe university administrators!) you could try to replicate these results. The kids would be the novices and the administrators would be the experts. If the results are consistent with what Tom Wujec has found, it would certainly lead to a lively discussion about different cognitive approaches between novices and experts. Below is Wujec’s TED talk on this exercise.

<https://www.ted.com/talks/tom_wujec_build_a_tower>