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Rose Reissman

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Culture Grab Bag—A Middle School Multidisciplinary Product Approach

Rose Reissman

I wanted to engage my diverse, inner-city, multiethnic seventh graders in a hands-on cultural communications exchange. I also wanted this culture probe to be pleasurable, social, warm, supportive, and non-threatening. I remembered a delightful moment from my own middle school experience, a holiday party grab bag where each of the students was asked to bring in a wrapped gift that cost less than a dollar. Every student had pulled out an individually wrapped gift which added to our festive pre-holiday event. Why not use this same grab bag exchange to begin cultural sharing?

I gave the students a few days notice to bring in a token, emblem, ornament, accessory, piece of jewelry, or figurine which was in some way part of their culture. Since our school was located in a high-crime neighborhood, I asked that gold jewelry and expensive ornaments not be brought into class. Other than the request for culture items, I did not tell the students what we would be doing with the items collected.

On the day designated for the culture bag, I brought in two large brown shopping bags and about eight to ten culture bag items from my own home collection to provide items for those students who had forgotten to bring in items or didn't have items available.

The students were asked not to discuss their items, but just to drop them carefully (some were

fragile and had to be hand-held for later inclusion) in the bags which were in the care of two self-nominated student bag holders. Once all the items were collected, the student bag holders were asked to go around the classroom with their full bags and to redistribute all the items collected, making certain that students did not receive the precise item they had contributed. Included in the culture bag items were the ones I had brought in so there were sufficient individual items for everyone in the class.

After students had reached in and grabbed out a single culture item, they were asked to choose one of two writing options. If students were familiar with the object and its cultural import, they were to write a brief physical and functional description of it. If the objects were unfamiliar to students, they were challenged to generate at least three questions about it. During the time remaining they were to develop a speculative paragraph detailing the potential function or cultural meaning of the object. The students were given ten to fifteen minutes for their individual cultural explanations.

As I walked around the room I was very impressed by the unaccustomed delicacy and sensitivity with which my students handled their objects. I had never seen all of them so quietly focused, pens in hand, and notebooks open. As I looked over the objects I was also impressed by their range and variety.

Despite my admonition about not bringing in expensive jewelry, I noticed that the culture objects included beaded bracelets, silver engraved rings, cloisonné earrings, a button with yasoo, dolls of various facial features and dolls with no features, a red ribbon signifying solidarity, cultural holiday greeting cards, crosses, stamps, a kiddush cup (my contribution) with Kwanza card, music tapes, small flags, AIDS sufferers stick pins, hello buttons with greetings in different languages, children's holiday pop-up books, a bracelet with the name of a human rights prisoner, letter openers, Christmas ornaments, refrigerator magnets, four-leaf clovers, Claddagh ring, and a guava salve. While they worked with their peers' objects many of the students glanced over to see where the objects they had brought in had landed. I reminded them that we would share our findings and our questions later in a group discussion.

After the students had had sufficient time to examine their culture objects, they got up to share what they had written about the objects including any questions they had about them. I asked that the student who had brought in the actual cultural object respond to the description and questions raised by the student examiner.

Each student stood up to display his/her object and present it. There was a palpable warmth and sense of community as the presentations were done. Since every student had been given an object, each had to present, which was not "normal" in my class where students had the option of sharing or not sharing their own works with the class. I noticed that even the shyest, most soft-spoken students stood up to share their objects. I dispensed with my usual admonition to "project" and watched as several students supportively leaned forward to "catch" what their peers were saying.

As students presented their culture object and the student who had brought in the object responded to the presentation, I suggested that some of the shared insights and cultural data being collected be written on the board. One student volunteered to put up the board notes. As the presentations unfolded, a rich range of insights extracted from the cultural grab bag emerged:

Good luck emblems/prosperity emblem

- guardian angel (Catholic)
- Jewish ring with mazel tov
- good luck saying
- linen and lace (ornaments)
- horse shoe
- four-leaf clover
- Hamsa (Jewish culture) healing hand emblem, good health
- horn of plenty

Common greetings

- ya sou, Greek
- Shalom, Hebrew
- ciad mile dalte, Irish
- ciao, Italian
- quel tal, ola, Dominican
- como esta? Mexican
- Shalom aleichem, aleichem shalom, Yiddish

Toys as culture items

- Dominican dolls, usually faceless
- Chanuka Dreidel, letters on tops spell out "a great miracle happened there"
- Pop-up books detailing holiday Mexican doll, represents Mexican Indian

Jewelry as cultural expression

- Macedonian ring
- cross of nails
- Peruvian earrings containing actual Peruvian coins
- Yasou pin
- American flag stick pin

Clothing as culture items

- yamada, Jewish culture, fez
- bolero
- sombrero
- veil
- kimono
- plaids
- sarong
- kilts
- sari
- leiderhosen (shirts and suspenders)

While notes were being taken by students, I listened to the unusually detailed descriptions of the culture objects read by the students. Composing detailed descriptions had always been a difficult skill to teach. But the use of these authentic cultural objects, especially those that were unfamiliar to the students, had resulted in rich, vivid descriptions.

- A large golden pin with a Lucite insert inside that held a small golden bird with lead in its beak. The bird is flying upward.
- A cross on a black cord. The cross is made up of large nails. It has been hand-welded together. It gives an impression of tremendous strength.

Another unexpected benefit of the project was the quality of the critical questions generated by the students and the immediate responses to those questions provided by their peers. Among the questions: Why are the Dominican dolls featureless? What do the symbols on the Macedonian ring stand for? How do you play with the Driedel? Why are some of the Dominican dolls darker or lighter than others?

The individual presentations and questions each culminated in applause so the total sharing for a class of 29 students took almost two periods. After the sharing I decided to see if this multidisciplinary cultural activity, which had obviously engaged the class and demonstrated appreciable qualitative and quantitative writings and oral communications, could be expanded into an ongoing project. Although I had some very definite ideas on how this was to be done, I decided in line with the very student-centered theme of the project to draw on the students ideas of what to do.

So I posed the questions to them as they looked at all the cultural objects displayed on my desk. Among the "extension" or "next" possibilities the student suggested were:

- Videotaping the cultural grab bag presentations with music (either on cassette or song) from each culture. Unbeknownst to their parents and relatives, some of the students planned to record them singing appropriate cultural refrains and/or to abscond with music cassettes families wouldn't lend the class (I dissuaded them from that idea!)
- A native arts workshop. Many students wanted to get in someone qualified in Mexican bead craft so they could design authentic bracelets similar to the one brought in for the culture bag.
- A parent/family member panel providing more information on the cultural objects.
- Use of various objects to teach geometry and symmetry.
- Contribute or loan some of our special objects to a local museum, bookstore, or community center/church group for an exhibit.

- Exhibit some of the objects in a school display case.
- Take photographs of the items. Display them in a gallery photo exhibit. Have the contributors and/or their families write descriptions. Produce an exhibit catalog with students' descriptions and stories of the culture objects.
- Rotate the kind of culture object to be shared. One week a photo, one week a song on tape, one on artwork, one week a letter, stamp or map, one week clothes, one accessories and one food.
- Develop a school culture museum with changing exhibits. Have the class write a catalog, desktop publish it, and invite other classes and parents to the museum.
- Develop a quiz on the culture bag. Have an answer sheet so students can check themselves.
- Have students from our class run culture grab bags in fourth grade elementary classes where we peer-teach.
- Create a culture bag newsletter with new culture items and an exchange column each month.

In the first year of our culture bag grab, we did manage to have a Culture Bag Interactive Community Museum set up for two days in our school. Students got their first taste of cultural exhibit curatorial, catalog, docent, and publicist duties. The PTA financed the opening reception and ribbon cutting. Two tape recorders provided alternating authentic Mexican, Dominican, Italian, African American, and Irish music. But as the students pointed out, time, school space, and budget were against us.

We hope to expand the project next year to include our peer elementary classes and a permanent museum based in the district office so we can have a musical, science, geography, photo and other culture bag themed exhibits. But beyond what my seventh graders can or may do with the culture grab bag, it can be adapted by middle school integrated language arts teachers to "grab on" multiple intelligence student capacities in service of multicultural conversation, collaboration, and community outreach. Whatever the ultimate product, project, publication, or parental involvement component, the culture grab bag offers a continuing, expanding cultural curricula study. Like the good ole grab bag, it can become a staple of the evolving multicultural classroom.